SUSSEX GORSE

SHEILA KAYE-SMITH

M. F. O'Brien.
Mentone 1923.
From Mrs Surrock.

CATHOLIC CENTRE
MENTONE

SUSSEX GORSE

BY THE SAME AUTHOR

UNIFORM WITH THIS VOLUME

THE TRAMPING METHODIST
STARBRACE
SPELL LAND
THE CHALLENGE TO SIRIUS
GREEN APPLE HARVEST
TAMARISK TOWN
JOANNA GODDEN
LITTLE ENGLAND

Sussex Gorse

BY

SHEILA KAYE-SMITH

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SUSSEX GORSE

PROLOGUE

THE CHALLENGE

§ 1.

BOARZELL FAIR had been held every year on Boarzell Moor for as long as the oldest in Peasmarsh could remember. The last Thursday in October was the date, just when the woods were crumpling into brown, and fogs blurred the wavy sunsets.

The Moor was on the eastern edge of the parish, five miles from Rye. Heaving suddenly swart out of the green water-meadows by Socknersh, it piled itself towards the sunrise, dipping to Leasan House. It was hummocked and tussocked with coarse grass—here and there a spread of heather, growing, like all southern heather, almost arboreally. In places the naked soil gaped in sores made by coney-warrens or uprooted bushes. Stones and roots, sharn, shards, and lumps of marl, mixed themselves into the wealden clay, which oozed in red streaks of potential fruitfulness through their sterility.

The crest of Boarzell was marked by a group of firs, very gaunt and wind-bitten, rising out of a mass of gorse, as the plumes of some savage chief might nod mangily above his fillet. When the gorse was in bloom,

one caught the flare of it from the Kentish hills, or away westward from Brightling and Dallington. This day in the October of 1835, the flowerets were either nipped or scattered, or hidden by the cloths the gipsies had spread to dry on the bushes.

The gipsies always camped on the flanks of the Fair, which they looked on with greater detachment than the gaujos who crowded into its heart, either selling or buying, doing or being done. Just within the semi-circle of their earth-coloured tents were the caravans of the showmen, gaudily painted, with seedy horses at tether, very different from the Romany gris. Then came the booths, stalls piled with sweets in an interesting state of preservation, trays of neck and shoulder ribbons, tinsel cords, tin lockets with glass stones, all fairings, to be bought out of the hard-won wages of husbandry in love. Then there was the panorama, creaking and torn in places, but still giving a realistic picture of the crowning of King William; there was the merry-go-round, trundled noisily by two sweating cart-horses; there was the cocoa-nut shy, and the fighting booth, in the doorway of which half-breed Buck Washington loved to stand and display his hairy chest between the folds of his dressing-gown; and there was the shooting-gallery, where one could pot at the card-board effigies of one's hates, Lord Brougham who had robbed the poor working man of his parish relief, or Boney, still a blood-curdler to those who had seen the building of the Martello towers.

To-day business was bad. Here and there a plough-boy pulled up his slop and fumbled for pennies in his corduroys, but for the most part the stalls were deserted, even in certain cases by their holders. This was not because the Fair was empty. On the contrary, it was much more crowded than usual; but the crowd clotted into groups, all discussing the same thing—the Inclosure.

It was some months since Sir John Bardon, Squire of the Manor of Flightshot, had taken advantage of the Inclosure Act and manœuvred a bill for the inclosure of Boarzell. Since then there had been visits of commissioners, roamings of surveyors, deliveries of schedules, strange talk of turbary and estovers, fire-bote and house-bote. The neighbourhood was troubled, perplexed. Then perplexity condensed into indignation when all that Inclosure stood for became known—no more pasturage for the cow or goat which meant all the difference between wheaten and oaten bread, no more wood-gleanings for fire or wind-beaten roof, no more of the tussocky grass for fodder, or of gorse to toughen palings against escaping fowls.

Then, when Fair-time came, people began to mutter "no more Fair." It was as hard to imagine Boarzell without the Fair as without its plume of firs. The Squire gave out his intention of tolerating the Fair, as long as it did not straggle from the crest. But this failed to soothe the indignant and sore, for it was humbling to have the Fair as a matter of toleration. Also at that time there was talk of fences. All the Moor had been mapped out, the claims considered, the road repaired, and now nothing more was to be done except to put up the fences which would definitely seal Boarzell as Flightshot's own.

There was naturally a party who championed Manor rights—Sir John Bardon was a good landlord, and would have been better had his budget cramped him less. Now he would sell Boarzell in building plots, and his tenants would reap the benefit. He had not inclosed the land for himself. More houses would mean more trade for shops and farms, Peasmarsh might flower into a country town. . . .

But the majority was anti-Bardon. There were grumblings about allotments, especially from copy-holders. The commissioners had been off-hand in their

treatment of claims, ignoring everyone except freeholders, of whom there were only two.

" They say as how Realf's not done badly fur himself at Grandturzel," said old Vennal of Burntbarns; " forty acres they gave him, and all bush and timber rights."

" And what about Odiam ? " asked Ticehurst of Hole. " I haven't seen Backfield these three weeks, but there's a tale going räound as how the commissioners have bin tedious sharp, and done him out of everything he hoped to get—surelye ! "

" And him freehold ! "

" Sixty acres."

" How did they do it ? "

" Oh, it's just a tale that's going räound—says they found some lawyer's mess in his title-deed. His father never thought of common rights when he bought the land, and it seems as how they must be written down just lik anything else. . . . But there's young Ben Backfield talking to Coalbran. He'll tell us, I reckon."

They went over to a man and a lad, standing together by the gingerbread stall.

" We was wondering wot yer fäather had got out o' them commissioners, Ben," said Ticehurst.

Reuben Backfield scowled. His thick black brows scowled easily, but the expression of his face was open and cheerful, would have been kindly even, were it not for a certain ruthlessness of the lips. There was more character in his face than is usual with a boy of fifteen—otherwise he looked younger than his age, for though tall and well-knit, his limbs had all the graceful immaturity and supple clumsiness one sees in the limbs of calves and foals.

" Fäather äun't got naun—haven't you heard ? He made his claim, and then they asked to see the title-deeds, and it turned out as how he hadn't got no common rights at all—leastways so the lawyers said."

" But he used to send the cows on, didn't he ? "

" Yes—now and agäun—didn't know it wurn't right. Seems it 'ud have been better if he'd sent 'em oftener ; there's no understanding that lawyer rubbidge. Now he mayn't täake so much as a blade of grass."

" Realf of Grandturzel has got his bit all safe."

Reuben spat.

" Yes—they couldn't pick any holes in his claim, or they would have, I reckon. The Squire 'ud like every rood of Boarzell, though the Lard knows wot he'll do wud it now he's got it."

" Your fäather must be in lamentable heart about all this, surelye."

The boy shrugged and frowned.

" He döan't care much. Fäather, he likes to be comfortable, and this Inclosure wöan't make much difference to that. 'Täun't as if we wanted the pasture badly, and Fäather he döan't care about land."

He dragged the last word a little slowly, and there was the faintest hint of a catch in his voice.

" And your mother, and Harry ? "

" They döan't care, nuther—it's only me."

" Lard, boy !—and why should you care if they döan't ? "

Reuben did not speak, but a dull red crept over the swarthiness of his cheeks, and he turned away.

He walked slowly, his hands in his pockets, to where the gable of the booth jutted between him and his questioners. From here he could see the slope of Boarzell, rolling slowly down to some red roofs and poplars. These roofs and poplars were Odiam, the farm which his grandfather had bought, which his father had tilled and fattened . . . and now it was humbled, robbed of its rights—and his father still went whistling to the barn, because, though fifty acres had been withheld from him by a quibble, he still had a bright fire, with a pretty wife and healthy boys beside it.

Reuben's lip curled. He could not help despising his father for this ambitionless content.

"We're no worser off than we wur before," Joseph Backfield had said a day or two ago to his complaining boy—"we've our own meadows for the cows—'täun't as if we were poor people."

"But, fäather, think wot we might have had—forty acres inclosed for us, like they have at Grandturzel."

"'Might have—might have'—that döan't trouble me. It's wot I've got I think about. And then, say we had it—wot 'ud you mäake out o' Boarzell?—nasty mess o' marl and shards, no good to anyone as long as thistles äun't fashionable eating."

"*I* cud mäake something out of Boarzell."

At this his father burst into a huge fit of laughter, and Reuben walked away.

But he knew he could do it. That morning he churned the soil with his heel, and knew he could conquer it. . . . He could plant those thistle-grounds with wheat. . . . Coward! his father was a coward if he shrank from fighting Boarzell. The land could be tamed just as young bulls could be tamed. By craft, by strength, by toughness man could fight the nature of a waste as well as of a beast. Give him Boarzell, and he would have his spade in its red back, just as he would have his ring in a bull's nose. . . .

But it was all hopeless. Most likely in future all that would remain free to him of Boarzell would be this Fair ground, crowded once a year. The rest would be built over—fat shop-keepers would grow fatter—oh, durn it!

He dashed his hand over his eyes, and then swung round, turning back towards the groups, lest he should become weak in solitude. Somehow the character of the crowd had changed while he had been away. Angry murmurs surged through it like waves, curses beat against one another, a rumour blew like foam from mouth to mouth.

"They're putting up the fences—workmen from Tonbridge—fences down by Socknersh."

"Drat 'em! durn 'em!"

"And why shudn't there be fences? What good did this old rubbidge-pläace ever do anyone? Scarce a mouthful fur a goat. Now it'll be built on, and there'll be money fur everybody."

"Money fur Bardon."

"Money fur us all. The Squire äun't no Tory grabber."

"Then wot dud he täake our land fur?"

"Wot wur the use of it?—save fur such as wanted a quiet pläace fur their wenching."

"Put up yer fists!"

The fight came, the battering of each other by two men, seemingly because of a private insult, really because they were representatives of two hostile groups, panting to be at each other's throats. They fought without science, staggering up and down, swinging arms like windmills, grabbing tufts of hair. At last old Buck Washington the bruiser could stand it no longer, and with a couple of clouts flung them apart, to bump on the ground and sit goggling stupidly at each other through trickles of blood.

That gave the crowd its freedom—hitherto the conflict had been squeezed into two representatives, leaving some hundred men merely limp spectators; but with the collapse of his proxy, each man felt the rage in him boil up.

"Come, my lads, we'll pull down their hemmed fences!"

"Down wud the fences! down wud Bardon!"

"Stand by the Squire, men—we'll all gain by it."

"Shut the Common to wenchers!"

But the Anti-Inclosure party was the strongest—it swept along the others as it roared down to Socknersh, brandishing sticks and stones and bottles that had all

appeared suddenly out of nowhere, shouting and stumbling and rolling and thumping. . . . Reuben was carried with it, conscious of very little save the smell of unwashed bodies and the bursting rage in his heart.

§ 2.

The fences were being put up in the low grounds by Socknersh, a leasehold farm on the fringe of the Manor estate. The fence-builders were not local men, and had no idea of the ill-feeling in the neighbourhood. Their first glimpse of it was when they saw a noisy black crowd tilting down Boarzell towards them—nothing definite could be gathered from its yells, for cries and counter-cries clashed together, the result being a confused " Wah-wah-wah," accompanied by much clattering of sticks and stones, thudding of feet and thumping of ribs.

When it came within ten yards of the fences, it doubted itself suddenly after the manner of crowds. It stopped, surged back, and mumbled. " Down with the fences ! " shouted someone—" Long live the Squire ! " shouted someone else. Then there was a pause, almost a silence.

Suddenly a great hullish lad sprang forward, rushed up to one of the fence-stakes, and flung it with a tangle of wire into the air.

" Down wud Bardon ! "

The spell of doubt was broken. A dozen others sprang towards the palings, a dozen more were after them to smite. The workmen swung their tools. The fight began.

It was a real battle with defences and sallies. The supporters of the Inclosure miraculously knotted together, and formed a guard for the labourers, who with hammers ready alternately for nail or head, bent to their work. They had no personal concern in the matter, but they resented being meddled with.

The Squire's party was much the weakest in numbers,

but luck had given it the best weapons of that chance armament. Alce of Ellenwhorne had a fine knobbed stick, worth a dozen of the enemy's, while Lewnes of Coldblow had an excellently broken bottle. Young Elphee had been through the bruiser-mill, and routed his assailants with successive upper-cuts. The anti-Bardonites, on the other hand, were inclined to waste their strength; they fought in a congested, rabblesome way; also they threw their bottles, not realising that a bottle is much better as a club than a missile. The result was that quite early in the conflict their ammunition gave out, and they were reduced to sticks and fists.

This made the two parties fairly equal, and the tide of battle ebbed and flowed. Now a bit of fence was put up, then it was torn down again; now it looked as if the fence-builders were going to be swept off the Moor, then it looked as if their posts were going to straggle up to Totease.

The Fair was quite deserted, the tenants of Socknersh and Totease climbed to their windows. Someone fetched the constable from Peasmarsh, but after surveying the battlefield from a distance he strategically retired. At Flightshot Manor the Squire was troubled. The Inclosure of Boarzell had been no piece of land-grabbing on his part, but a move for the good of his estate. He had always wanted to improve his tenants' condition, but had been thwarted by lack of means. He wondered if he ought to give orders to stop the fence-building.

"Sir, that would be folly!" cried his son.

"But it seems that there's a regular riot going on—quite a number of people have been hurt, and two ploughlands trodden up. Kadwell went over, but says he can do nothing."

"Send to Rye, then. Let 'em swear in some special constables, and drive the fellows off. But as for

stopping the work—that would be to play into their hands."

So the fight raged on, the Battle of Boarzell. Unfortunately it did not rage on Boarzell itself, but on its fruitful fringe, where the great ploughfields lapped up to the base of the Moor, taking the sunset on their wet brown ridges. Poor Ginner's winter wheat was all pulped and churned to ruin, and the same doom fell on Ditch's roots. Sometimes it seemed as if the Squire's men would attain their object, for the fence—very tottery and uncertain, it must be confessed—had wound a bit of the way past Totease towards Odiam. Dusk had fallen, but the men still worked, for their blood was up.

However, the Squire's party began to feel their lack of numbers; they were growing tired, their arms swung less confidently, and then Lewnes' bottle was broken right up at the neck, cutting his hand. He shouted that he was bleeding to death, and frightened the others. Someone sent a stone into Alce's eye. Then he too made a terrible fuss, threw down his stick, and ran about bleeding among the workmen.

The ground, soft with autumn rains, was now one great mud broth, and the men were daubed and spattered with it even to their hair. The attackers pressed on the wavering ring—one of the fence-builders was hit, and pitched down, taking a post and a whole trail of wire over with him—about thirty yards of fence came down with the pull, and flopped into the mud. The ring broke.

"Hop it, lads!" shouted a workman. Their protectors were gone, mixed indescribably with their assailants. They must run, or they would be lynched.

A hundred yards off a Totease barn-door gaped, and the workmen sprinted for it. In the darkness they were able to reach it without losing more than one of their number, who fell down and had the wit to pretend to be dead. The crowd seethed after them, but the door was shut, and the heavy bolts rattled behind it.

The barn was part of the farmhouse, and from one of the upper windows Ditch, furious at having his roots messed up, made pantomime to the effect that he would shoot any man who came further than the yard.

It was then for the first time that Reuben was frightened. Hitherto there had been too much violence and confusion for him to feel intensely, even rage. He had thrown stones, and had once been hit by a stone—a funny dull sore pain on his shoulder, and then the feeling of something sticky under his shirt. But he had never felt afraid, never taken any initiative, just run and struggled and shouted with the rest. Now he was frightened—it would be dreadful if the farmer fired into that thick sweating mass in the midst of which he was jammed.

Then, just because he was afraid, he flung up his arm, and the stone he had been grasping crashed into Ditch's window, sending the splintering glass into the room. He had no thought of doing it, scarcely knew he had done it—it was just because he was horribly frightened.

The next moment there was a bang, and Ditch's gun scattered duck-shot into the crowd. Men yelled, fought, struggled, stumbled about with their arms over their faces. For a moment nothing but panic moved them, but the next rage took its place. A volley of stones answered the gun, which being an old one and requiring careful loading, could not be brought into action again for some minutes.

"Burn him down!—Burn him down!—the hemmed murderer!"

Then began a regular siege. Stones showered upon the farmhouse roof, the shiver of broken glass tinkled through the dull roar of the attackers, groans and screams answered the bursting bang of the shot-gun. Men began to seize faggots from the wood-pile, and run with them towards the house. Then some tore up a haystack, but the wind caught the hay and blew it

everywhere, flinging swathes and streamers of it into the rioters' faces, giving them sudden armfuls of it, making their noses and eyes smart with the dust and litter.

It was quite dark now. The hulk of Boarzell loomed black behind the struggle, its fir crown standing out against a great wall of starless sky. Then suddenly something began to blaze—no one seemed to know what, for it was behind the crowd ; but it roared and crackled, and sparks and great burning strands flew out from it, threatening house and besiegers alike with destruction.

They had piled the faggots against the door of the barn. The workmen inside were tumbling about in the dark, half ignorant of what was going on.

" Bring a light ! " called someone. A boy dashed up with a handful of flaming straw—it blew out of his hand and flared away over the roof, scattering showers of sparks. A man yelled out that his shirt was burning. " Bring a light ! " someone called again. Then someone else shouted—" The constables from Rye ! "

The crowd ebbed back like a wave, carrying Reuben, now screaming and terrified, towards where something unknown burned with horrible crackles and roaring.

" The constables from Rye ! "

The crowd was like a boa-constrictor, it seemed to fold itself round him, smashing his ribs. He screamed, half suffocated. His forehead was blistered with heat. Again the crowd constricted. A dizziness came this time with the suffocation, and strange to say, as consciousness was squeezed out of him like wind out of a bellows, he had one last visit of that furious hate which had made him join the battle—hate of those who had robbed his father of Boarzell, and hate of Boarzell itself, because he would never be able to tame it as one tames a bull with a ring in its nose.

He choked, and fell into the darkness.

§ 3.

His first sensation on returning to consciousness was of being jolted. It was, like most half-realised experiences, on the boundary line between sensation and emotion, an affair almost of the heart. Then gradually it became more physical, the heart-pain separated itself from the body-pain. His body was being jolted, his heart was just sick with the dregs of hate.

Then he saw Orion hanging over him, very low in the windy sky, shaking with frost. His eyes fixed themselves on the constellation, then gradually he became aware of the sides of a cart, of the smell of straw, of the movement of other bodies that sighed and stirred beside him. The physical experience was now complete, and soon the emotional had shaped itself. Memory came, rather sick. He remembered the fight, his terror, the flaming straw, the crowd that constricted and crushed him like a snake. His rage and hate rekindled, but this time without focus—he hated just everyone and everything. He hated the wheels which jolted him, his body because it was bruised, the other bodies round him, the stars that danced above him, those unknown footsteps that tramped beside him on the road.

Where was he? He raised himself on his elbow, and immediately a head looked over the side of the cart.

"Wot's the matter wud you?" asked a gruff voice.

"I want to know where I'm going, surelye."

"You're going to Rye, that's where you're going, just fur a täaste of the rope's end, you young varmint."

The tones were not unkindly, and Reuben plucked up courage.

"Is the fight over?"

"Surelye! It all fizzled out, soon as them beasts saw the constables. Fifty speshul constables sworn in at Rye Town Hall, all of 'em wud truncheons! You couldn't expect any rabble-scrabble to face 'em."

"Reckon that lot had justabout crunched me up. I feel all stove in."

"And you'll feel stove in furder when the Crier's done wud you."

It was part of the Rye Town Crier's duties to flog the unruly youth of the district. Reuben made a face—not that he minded being flogged, but he felt badly bruised already. He fell back on the straw, and buried his head in it. They were on the Playden road, near Bannister's Town, and he would have time for a sleep before they came to Rye. Sleep helped things wonderfully.

But the strange thing was that he could not sleep, and stranger still, it was not the ache of his body that kept him awake, but the ache of his heart. Reuben was used to curling up and going to sleep like a little dog; only once had he lain awake at night, and that was with the toothache. Now he had scarcely any pain; indeed, the dull bruised feeling made him only more drowsy, but in his heart was something that made him tumble and toss, just as the aching tooth had done, made him want to snarl and bite. He rolled over and over in the straw, and was wide awake when they came to Rye. Neither did he sleep at all in the room where he and some other boys were locked for the night. The Battery gaol was full of adult rioters, so the youthful element—only some half-dozen captured—was shut up in the constable's house, where it played marbles and twisted arms till daylight.

The other boys were much younger than Reuben, who thumped their heads to let off some of his uncomfortable feelings. Indeed, there was talk of putting him with the grown-up prisoners, till the magistrate realised that juveniles were more easily disposed of. The scene at the court-house was so hurried that he scarcely knew he had been tried till the constable took him by the collar and threw him out of the dock. Then came some dreary

moments of waiting in a little stuffy, whitewashed room, while the Town Crier dealt with the victims separately.

Reuben did not in the least mind being flogged—it was all in the day's work—and showed scant sympathy for those fellow-criminals who cried for their mothers. Most of the cramp and stiffness had worn off, and his only anxiety was to have the thing over quickly, so that he could be home in time for supper.

At one o'clock he was given some bread and cheese, which he devoured ravenously; then he spent an hour in thinking of the sausages they always had for supper at Odiam on Fridays. At two the constable fetched him to his doom; he was grumbling and muttering to himself, and on arriving at the execution chamber it turned out that he had had words with the Town Crier, because the latter thought he had only six boys to flog, so had put on his coat and was going off to the new sluice at Scott's Float, meaning to get back comfortably in time for an oyster and beer supper at the London Trader. Having seven boys to flog made all the difference—he would be late, both at the sluice and the supper.

He took off his coat again, growling, and for the first time Reuben felt shame. It was such a different matter, this, from being beaten by somebody who was angry with one and with whom one was angry. He saw now that a beating was one of the many things which are all right as long as they are hot, but damnable when they are cold. He hunched his shoulders, and felt his ears burn, and just the slightest stickiness on his forehead.

One thing he had made up his mind to—he would not struggle or cry. Up till now he had not cared much what he did in that way; if yelling had relieved his feelings he had yelled, and never felt ashamed of it; but to-day he realised that if he yelled he would be ashamed. So he drove his teeth into his lower lip and fought through the next few minutes in silence.

He kept his body motionless, but in his heart strange things were moving. That hatred which had run through him like a knife just before he lost consciousness in the battle of Boarzell, suddenly revived and stabbed him again. It was no longer without focus, and it was no longer without purpose. Boarzell . . . the name seemed to dance before him in letters of fire and blood. He was suffering for Boarzell—his father had not been robbed, for his father did not care, but he, Reuben, had been robbed—and he had fought for Boarzell on Boarzell, and now he was bearing shame and pain for Boarzell. Somehow he had never till this day, till this moment, been so irrevocably bound to the land he had played on as a child, on which he had driven his father's cattle, which had broken with its crest the sky he gazed on from his little bed. Boarzell was his, and at the same time he hated Boarzell. For some strange reason he hated it as much as those who had taken it from him and as those who were punishing him because of it. He wanted to tame it, as a man tames a bull, with a ring in its nose.

There, at the post, quivering with a pain he scarcely felt, Reuben swore that he would tame and conquer Boarzell. The rage, the fight, the degradation, the hatred of the last twelve hours should not be in vain. In some way, as yet unplanned, Boarzell should one day be his—not only the fifty acres the commissioners had tweaked from his father, but the whole of it, even that mocking, nodding crest of firs. He would subdue it; it should bear grain as meekly as the most fruitful field; it should feed fat cattle; it should make the name of Odiam great, the greatest in Sussex. It should be his, and the world should wonder.

He left the post with a great oath in his heart, and a thin trickle of blood on his chin.

§ 4.

It was still early in the afternoon when Reuben set out homewards, but he had a long way to go, and felt tired and bruised. The constable had given him an apple, but as soon as he had munched up its sweetness, life became once more grey. The resolve which for a few minutes had been like a flame warming and lighting his heart, had now somehow become just an ordinary fact of life, as drearily a part of his being as his teeth or his stomach. One day he would own Boarzell Moor, subdue it, and make himself great—but meantime his legs dragged and his back was sore.

All the adventure and excitement he had been through, with no sleep, and eccentric feeding, combined to make him wretched and cast down. Once he cried a little, crouching low under the hedge, and thoroughly ashamed of himself.

However, things grew better after a time. The road broke away from the fields, and free winds blew over it. On either side swelled a soft common, not like Boarzell, but green and watery. It was grown with bracken, and Reuben laughed to see the big buck rabbits loppetting about, with a sudden scuttle and bob when he clapped his hands. Then a nice grinning dog ran with him a mile of the way, suddenly going off on a hunt near Starvecrow. Reuben came to Odiam aching with nothing worse than hunger.

Odiam Farm was on the northern slope of Boarzell—sixty acres, mostly grass, with a sprinkling of hops and grain. There was a fine plum orchard, full of old gnarled trees, their branches trailing with the weight of continued crops. The house itself was red and weather-stung as an August pippin, with strange curves in its gable-ends, which had once been kilns. It was one of those squat, thick, warm-tinted houses of Sussex which have stood so long as to acquire a kind of naturalisa-

tion into the vegetable kingdom—it was difficult to imagine it had ever been built, it seemed so obviously a growth, one would think it had roots in the soil like an oak or an apple tree.

Reuben opened the door, and the welcome, longed-for smell stole out to him—smothering the rivalry of a clump of chrysanthemums, rotting in dew.

" Sossiges," he whispered, and ran down the passage to the kitchen.

Here the sound of voices reminded him that he might have difficulties with his family, but Reuben's attitude towards his family, unless it forced itself directly into his life, was always a little aloof.

" Well, lad," said his father, " so you're back at last."

" You knew where I wur ? "

" Lucky we dud—or we'd have bin in tedious heart about you, away all night."

Reuben pulled up his chair to the table. His father sat at one end, and at the other sat Mrs. Backfield ; Harry was opposite Reuben.

" If only you wud be a good boy lik Harry," said his mother.

Reuben looked at Harry with detachment. He was not in the least jealous of his position as favourite son, he had always accepted it as normal and inevitable. His parents did not openly flaunt their preference, and they were always very kind to Reuben—witness the gentleness with which he was received to-day after his escapade —but one could not help seeing that their attitude towards the elder boy was very different from what they felt for the younger.

The reasons were obvious ; Harry was essentially of a loving and dependent nature, whereas Reuben seemed equally indifferent to caresses or commands. He was not a bad son, but he never appeared to want affection, and was always immersed in dark affairs of his own. Besides, Harry was a beautiful boy. Though only a year

younger than Reuben, in the midst of the awkward age, his growing limbs quite lacked the coltishness of his brother's. He was like Reuben, but with all the little variations that make the difference between good and ordinary looks. Just as he had Reuben's promising body without that transitory uncouthness so natural to his years, so he had Reuben's face, more softly chiselled, more expressive and full of fire. His brows were lighter, his eyes larger, his hair less shiny and tough, growing in a soft sweep from his forehead, with the faintest hint of a curl at his ears. Neighbours spoke of him as " beautiful Harry." Reuben pondered him occasionally—he would have liked to know his brother better, liked to love him, but somehow could never quite manage it. In spite of his clinging nature, there was something about Harry that was unhuman, almost elfin. The father and mother did not seem to notice this, but Reuben felt it, scarcely knowing how or why.

To-night Harry did not ask him any questions, he just sat dreamily listening while Reuben poured out his story, with all the enthusiasms and all the little reservations which were characteristic of him. Once Harry put out his hand and stroked his mother's, once he smiled at his father.

" Well, I shan't go scolding you, lad," said Joseph Backfield, " fur I reckon you've bin punished enough. Though it wur unaccountable lucky you dudn't git anything worse. I hear as how Pix and Hearsfield are to be transported, and there'll be prison for some thirty more. Wot dud yer want to go mixing up in them things fur ? "

" I wur justabout mad."

" How, mad ? "

" Mad that they shud shut up Boarzell and that Odiam shudn't have its rights."

" Wot's Odiam to you ?—It äun't yours, it's mine, and if I döan't care about the land, why

shud you go disgracing yourself and us all because of it ? "

" You ought to care, surelye ! "

A dull brick-red had crept into the brown cheeks, and Reuben's brows had nearly met over his nose.

" Ought to ! Listen to that, mother. Dud you ever hear the like ? And if I cared, my lad, where wud you all be ? Where wud be that plate o' sossiges you're eating ? It's just because I äun't a land-grabber lik so many I cud näum that you and Harry sit scrunching here instead of working the flesh off your böans, that your mother wears a muslin apron 'stead of a sacking one, that you have good food to eat, and white bread, 'stead of oaten. Wot's the use of hundreds of acres if you äun't comfortable at höame ? I've no ambitions, so I'm a happy man. I döan't want nothing I haven't got, and so I haven't got nothing I döan't want. Surelye ! "

Reuben was silent, his heart was full of disgust. Somehow those delicious sausages stuck in his throat, but he was too young to push away his plate and refuse to eat more of this token of his father's apathy and Odiam's shame. He ate silently on, and as soon as he had finished rose from table, leaving the room with a mumble about being tired.

When he was half-way upstairs he heard his mother call him, asking him if he would like her to bathe his shoulders. But he refused her almost roughly, and bounded up to the attic under the crinkled eaves, which was his own, his sanctuary—his land.

It was odd that his parents did not care. Now he came to think of it, they did not seem to care about anything very much, except Harry. It never struck him to think it was odd that he should care when they did not.

He sat down by the window, and leaning his elbow on the sill, looked out. It was still windy, and the sky was shredded over with cloud, lit by the paleness of a hidden

moon. In the kitchen, two flights below, a fiddle sounded. It was Harry playing to his parents as he always played in the evening, while they sat on either side of the fire, nodding, smiling, half-asleep. Clods! Cowards! A sudden rage kindled in his heart against those three, his father, his mother, and beautiful Harry, who cared nothing about that for which he had suffered all things.

The crest of Boarzell was just visible against the luminous sky. There was something sinister and challenging about those firs. The gorse round their trunks seemed in that strange half-stormy, half-peaceful night to throw off a faint glimmer of gold. The fiddle wept and sang into the darkness, and outside the window two cherry trees scraped their boughs together.

Reuben's head dropped on his arm, and he slept out of weariness. An hour later the cramp of his shoulders woke him; the fiddle was silent, the moon was gone, and the window framed a level blackness. With a little moan he flung himself dressed on the bed.

BOOK I

THE BEGINNING OF THE FIGHT

§ 1.

IT was five years later, in the February of 1840.

A winter sunset sparkled like cowslip wine on the wet roofs of Odiam. It slipped between the curtains of the room where Reuben watched beside his dead father, and made a golden pool in the dusk.

Joseph Backfield had been dead twelve hours. His wife had gone, worn out with her grief, to rest on the narrow unaccustomed bed which had been put up in the next room when he grew too ill to have her at his side. Reuben knew that Harry was with her—Harry would be sitting at her head, his arm under the pillow, ready for that miserable first waking, when remembering and forgetting would be fused into one pain. Reuben knew that they did not need him, that they had all they wanted in each other—now, as during the nights and days of illness, when he had never felt as if he had any real link with those three, his father and mother and Harry.

This evening he sat very still beside the dead. Only once he drew down the sheet from his father's face and gazed at the calm features, already wearing that strange sculpt look which is the gift of death. The peaceful lips, the folded hands, seemed part of an embracing restfulness. Reuben's heart warmed with a love in which was little grief. He thought of his father's life—calm, kindly, comfortable, ambitionless. He had

been happy; having wanted little he had attained it and had died enjoying it.

Reuben recalled the last five years—they had been fat years. One by one small comforts, small luxuries, had been added to the house, as the farm throve modestly, fulfilling itself within the narrow boundaries its master had appointed. And all the time that mocking furious crest of Boarzell had broken the sky in the south—telling of beauty unseized, might unconquered, pride untamed.

So now was it strange that clashing with his sorrow, and his regretful love for one who, if he had never truly loved him, had always treated him with generosity and kindness, there should be a soaring sense of freedom and relief?—a consciousness of standing on the edge of a boundless plain after years of confinement within walls? For Reuben was master now. Odiam was his —and the future of Odiam. He could follow his own will, he could take up that challenge which Boarzell Moor had flung him five years ago, when he fought and was flogged because he loved the red gaping clay between the gorse-stumps.

His plans of conquest were more definite now. He had been forming them for five years, and he could not deny that during his father's illness he had shaped them with a certain finality. The road was clear before him, and to a slight extent fate had been propitious, keeping open a way which might well have been blocked before he began to tread it. Reuben had never been able to settle what he should do if the Squire's first project were fulfilled and the Moor sold in building plots. House property entered with difficulty into his imagination, and he coveted only Boarzell virgin of tool and brick. Luckily for him, Bardon's scheme had completely failed. The position of the common was bad for houses, windy and exposed in days when the deepest hollows were the most eligible building

sites; the neighbourhood was both unfashionable and unfruitful, therefore not likely to attract either people of means or people without them. Also there were grave difficulties about a water supply. So Boarzell remained desolate, except for the yearly jostle of the Fair, and rumour said that Bardon would be only too glad to sell it or any piece of it to whoever would buy.

If Sir Peter had been alive he would probably have given the common back to the people, but Sir Miles was more far-sighted, also of prouder stuff. Such a policy would give the impression of weakness, and there was always a chance of selling the land piecemeal. Reuben's ambition was to buy a few acres at the end of that year, letting the Squire know of his plan to buy more—this would encourage him to keep Boarzell inclosed, and would act as a check on any weak generosity.

There was no reason why this ambition should not be fulfilled, for now that he himself was at the head of affairs it would be possible to save money. Reuben's lips straightened—of late they had grown fuller, but also sterner in that occasional straightening, which changed the expression of his mouth from half-ripened sensuality to a full maturity of resolve. Now he was resolved—there should be changes at Odiam. He must give up that old easy, "comfortable" life on which his father had set such store. A ghost seemed to whisper in the room, as if the voice of the dead man once more declared his gospel—"I've no ambitions, so I'm a happy man. I döan't want nothing I haven't got, and so I haven't got nothing I döan't want."

Yes—there was no denying his father had been happy. But what a happiness! Even there by his side Reuben despised it. He, Reuben, would never be happy till he had torn up that gorse and lopped those firs from the top of Boarzell. In a kind of vision he saw the Moor with wheatfields rolling up to the crest, he smelt the baking of glumes in brown sunlight, the dusty savour of

the harvest-laden earth. He heard the thud of horses' hoofs and the lumber of waggon-wheels, the shouts of numberless farm-hands. That sinister waste, profitless now to every man, should be a source of wonder and wealth and fame. "Odiam—the biggest farm in Sussex. Backfield made it. He bought Boarzell Moor acre by acre and fought it inch by inch, and now there's nothing like it in the south." . . .

He sprang up and went to the window, pulling back the curtain. The sun had gone, and the sky was a grey pool rimmed with gold and smoke. Boarzell, his dream-land, stood like a dark cloud against it, shaggy and waste. There in the dimness it looked unconquerable. Suppose he should be able to wring enough money from the grudging earth to buy that wilderness, would he ever be able to subdue it, make it bear crops? He remembered words from the Bible which he had heard read in church—"Canst thou draw out Leviathan with a hook? or bore his jaw through with a thorn? Will he make a covenant with thee? Wilt thou take him for a servant for ever?"

He brought his fist down heavily on the sill. He was just as confident, just as resolute as before, but now for the first time he realised all that the battle would mean. He could fight this cruel, tough thing only by being cruel and tough himself. He must be ruthless as the wind that blustered over it, hard as the stones that covered it, wiry as the gorse-roots that twisted in its marl. He must be all this if he was even to start the fight. To begin with, he would have to make his mother and Harry accept the new state of things. They must realise that the old soft life was over, that they would have to work, pull from the shoulder, sacrifice a hundred things to help fulfil his great ambition. He must not spare them—he must not spare anyone; he would not spare them, any more than he would spare himself.

§ 2.

Joseph Backfield was buried four days later. His body was carried to the church in a hay-waggon, drawn by the meek horses which had drawn his plough. Beside it walked Blackman, the only farm-hand at Odiam, in a clean smock, with a black ribbon tied to his hat. Five men from other farms acted with him as bearers—they were volunteers, for old Joseph had been popular in the neighbourhood, dealing sharply with no man.

Immediately behind the cart walked Reuben with his mother on his arm. Her face was hidden in a clumsy black veil, which the Rye mantua-maker had assured her was the London fashion, and she was obviously ill at ease in the huge black shawl and voluminous skirts which the same fashion, according to the Rye mantua-maker, had decreed. Her hand pulled at Reuben's sleeve and stroked it as if for comfort. It was a smallish hand, and wonderfully soft for a farmer's wife—but then Mary Backfield had not lived like an ordinary farmer's wife. Under the thick veil, her face still had a certain soft colour and youthfulness, though she was nearly forty, and most women of her position were wrinkled and had lost their teeth by thirty-five. Also the curves of her figure were still delicate. She had been cherished by her husband, had done only light household work for him and borne him only two children. She carried the tokens of her happiness in smooth surfaces and soft lines.

After Mrs. Backfield and her eldest son, walked Harry and his sweetheart, Naomi Gasson. They had been sweethearts just three months, and were such a couple as romance gloats over—young, comely, healthy, and full of love. Years had perfected the good looks of "beautiful Harry." He was a tall creature, lithe and straight as a birch tree. His face, agreeably tanned, glowed with youth, half dreamy, half riotous; his eyes

were wild as a colt's, and yet tender. Naomi was a fit mate for him, with a skin like milk, and hair the colour of tansy. She wore a black gown like Mrs. Backfield, but she had made it herself, and it was friendly to her, hinting all the graciousness of her immaturity. These two tried to walk dejectedly, and no doubt there was some fresh young sadness in their hearts, but every now and then their bodies would straighten with their happiness, and their eyes turn half afraid from each other's because they could not help smiling in spite of the drooped lips.

Then came old Gasson, Naomi's father, and well-known as a shipbuilder at Rye—for this was a good match of Harry's, and Reuben hoped, but had no reason to expect, he would turn it to Odiam's advantage. After him walked most of the farmers of the neighbourhood, come to see the last of a loved, respected friend. Even Pilbeam was there, from beyond Dallington, and Oake from Boreham Street. The Squire himself had sent a message of condolence, though he had been unable to come to the funeral. Reuben did not particularly want his sympathy. He despised the Bardons for their watery Liberalism and ineffectual efforts to improve their estates.

It was about half a mile to the church—over the hanger of Tidebarn Hill. The morning was full of soft loamy smells, quickening under the February sun, which is so pale and errant, but sometimes seems to have the power to make the earth turn in its sleep and dream of spring. Peasmarsh church-tower, squab like a toadstool, looked at itself in the little spread of water at the foot of the churchyard. Beside this pool, darkened with winter sedges, stood Parson Barnaby, the Curate-in-Charge of Peasmarsh, Beckley, and Iden. His boots under his surplice were muddy and spurred, for he had just galloped over from a wedding at Iden, and his sweat dropped on the book as he read " I know that my

Redeemer liveth, and that he shall stand at the latter day upon the earth."

Before committing the body to the ground, he said a few words in praise of the dead man. He spoke of his generosity to his neighbours, his kindness to his dependents, his excellences as a husband and a father. " This, brethren, was indeed a man after God's own heart. He lived simply and blamelessly, contented with his lot, and seeking no happiness that did not also mean happiness to those around him. The call of the world " —by which Mr. Barnaby meant Babylonish Rye— " fell unheard on ears attuned to sweet domestic sounds. Ambition could not stir him from the repose of his family circle. Like a patriarch of old, he sat in peace under his vine and his fig-tree. . . ."

Reuben stood motionless at the graveside, erect, like a soldier at attention. People in the crowd, who wearied of the dead man's virtues, whispered about the eldest son.

" Surelye !—he's a purty feller, is young Ben. To-day he looks nearly as valiant as Harry."

" He's a stouter man than his brother."

" Stouter, and darker. What black brows he has, Mus' Piper ! "

" How straight he stands ! "

" I wäonder wot he's thinking of."

§ 3.

Reuben was strangely silent on the walk home. His mother made one or two small remarks which passed unheeded. She noticed that his arm, on which her hand lay, was very tense.

When they came to the group of cottages at the Forstal, a girl ran down the garden path and leaned against the fence. She was a pretty brown girl, and as they went by she smiled at Reuben. But he did not seem to see her, he walked steadily on, and she slunk

back to the house, biting her lips. " Dudn't he see me, or wur he jest pretending not to ? " she muttered

At Odiam dinner was waiting. It was a generous meal, which combined the good things of this world with the right amount of funereal state. Several of the neighbours had been invited, and the housewife wished to do them honour, knowing that her table boasted luxuries not to be found at other farms—a bottle of French wine, for instance, which though nobody touched it, gave distinction to the prevalent ale, and one or two light puddings, appealing to the eye as well as to the palate. As soon as the meal was over and the guests had gone, Reuben took himself off, and did not reappear till supper-time.

During dinner he had been even more thoughtful than the occasion warranted, leaving his mother and Harry to talk to the company, though he had taken with a certain dignity his place as host and head of the house. Now at supper he was still inclined to silence. A servant girl laid the dishes on the table, then retired. Mrs. Backfield and Harry spoke in low tones to each other.

. . . " Mother, how much did this chocolate cost wot we're drinking ? " Reuben's voice made them both jump.

" How much ? why, two shillings a pound," said Mrs. Backfield, rather surprised.

" That's too much." Reuben's brows and mouth were straight lines.

" Wot d'you mean, Reuben ? "

" Why, two shillings is too much fur farm-folks lik us to give fur a pound of chocolate. It's naun but a treat, and we can do wudout it."

" But we've bin drinking chocolate fur a dunnamany years now—your poor fäather always liked it—and I döan't see why we should stop it."

" Look'ee, mother, I've something to tell you. I've a plan in my head, and it'll justabout mean being shut of

a lot of things besides chocolate. I know fäather dudn't care much about the farm, about mäaking it grow and buying more land, and all that. But I do. I mean to buy the whole of Boarzell."

There was a gasping silence.

" The whole of Boarzell," repeated Reuben.

He might have said the whole world, to judge by his mother's and Harry's faces.

" Yes—I mean every bit, even the bit Grandturzel's got now. Squire he wöan't be sorry to sell it, and I mean to buy it piece by piece. I'll buy my first piece at the end of this year. We must start saving money at wunst. But I can't do naun wudout you help me, you two."

" Wot d'you want to go buying Boarzell fur ? " asked Mrs. Backfield in a bewildered voice ; " the farm's präaper as it is—we döan't want it no bigger."

" And Boarzell's wicked tedious stuff," put in Harry ; " naun'll grow there but gorse."

" I'll have a good grain growing there in five year—döan't you go doubting it. The ground wants working, that's all. And as fur not wanting the farm no bigger, that wur fäather's idea—Odiam's mine now."

" Why can't we jest go on being happy and comfortable, lik we wur before ? "

" Because I've thought of something much grander, surelye. I'm going to mäake us all gurt people, and this a gurt farm. But you've got to help me, you and Harry."

" Wot d'you want us to do ? "

" Well, first of all, we must save all the money we can, and not go drinking chocolate and French wine, and eating sweet puddens and all such dentical stuff. And then, Harry and me, we're valiant chaps, and there never wur enough work for us to do. I'm going to send Blackman away—Harry and I can do quite easily wudout him and save his wages."

" Send away Blackman !—oh, Ben, he's bin with us fifteen year."

" I döan't care if he's bin a hunderd. There äun't enough work for three men on this farm, and it's a shame to go wasting ten shilling a week. Oh, mother, can't you see how glorious it'll be ? I know fäather wanted different, but I've bin thinking and dreaming of this fur years."

" You always wur queer about Boarzell. But your fäather 'ud turn in his grave to think of you sending off Blackman."

" He'll easily git another pläace—I'll find him one myself. And, mother—there's something more. Now you haven't got fäather to work fur, you'll find the time unaccountable long. Wot if you let Becky go, and did the cooking and that yourself ? "

" Oh, Reuben . . ."

" You shouldn't ought to ask mother that," said Harry. " She äun't used to work. It's well enough fur you and me, we're strong chaps, and there's no reason we shouldn't pull to a bit. But mother, she'd never do wudout the girl—you see, there's the dairy and the fowls as well as the house."

" We could help her out of doors."

" Lard !—you want some work ! "

Reuben sprang to his feet. " Yes—I do ! You're justabout right there. I'm starved fur work. I've never really worked in my life, and now I want to work till I drop. Look at my arm "—and he showed them his brown hairy arm, where the muscles swelled in lumps under the skin—" that's a workman's arm, and it's never worked yet—präaperly. You let me send off Blackman and Becky, and see how we manage wudout 'em. I'll do most of the work myself, I promise you. I couldn't have too much."

" You're a queer lad, Reuben—and more masterful than your poor fäather wur."

"Yes—I'm master here." He sat down, and looked round the table quite calmly. A vague uneasiness disturbed Mrs. Backfield and Harry. For some unfathomable reason they both felt a little afraid of Reuben.

He finished his supper and went out of the kitchen. Harry and his mother sat for a moment or two in silence.

"He always wur queer about Boarzell," said Mrs. Backfield at last; "you remember that time years ago when he got mixed up wud the riot? I said to his fäather then as I was sure Ben 'ud want to do something crazy wud the farm. But I never thought he'd so soon be mäaster," and a tear trickled over her smooth cheek.

"I döan't see no harm in his buying a bit of Boarzell if it's going cheap—but it äun't worth mäaking all ourselves uncomfortable for it."

"No. Howsumdever, we can't stand agäunst him—the pläace is his'n, and he can do wot he likes."

"Hush—listen!" said Harry.

The sound of voices came from the passage outside the kitchen. Reuben was talking to the girl. A word or two reached them.

"Durn! if he äun't getting shut of her!"

"I never said as I'd do her work."

Harry sprang to his feet, but his mother laid her hand on his arm.

"Döan't you go vrothering him, lad. It'll only set him agäunst you, and I döan't care, not really; there'll be unaccountable liddle work to do in the house now your poor fäather's gone, and Blackman wöan't be eating wud us. Besides, as he said, I'll find the days a bit slow wud naun to occupy me."

"But it's sass of him to go sending off the girl wudout your leave."

"He's mäaster here."

"Ho! we shall see that."

"Now you're not to go quarrelling wud him, Harry.

I'd sooner have peace than anything whatsumdever. I äun't used to being set agäunst people. Besides, it wöan't be fur long."

"No—you're justabout right there. I ought to be able to wed Naomi next April year, and then, mother—think of the dear liddle house we shall live in, you and she and I, all wud our own fields and garn, and no trouble, and Ben carrying through his own silly consarns here by himself."

"Yes, dearie, I know, and it's unaccountable good of you and Naomi to let me come wud you. I döan't think we should ought to mind helping your brother a bit here, when we've all that to look forrard to. But he's a strange lad, and your fäather 'ud turn in his grave to see him."

§ 4.

For the next few months Odiam was in a transitional state. It was gradually being divested of its old comfortable ways, and clad in new garments of endeavour. Gradually the life grew harder, and gradually the tense thought, the knife-edged ambition at the back of all the changes, came forward and asserted themselves openly.

Harry and his mother had not realised till then how hard Reuben could be. Hitherto they had never truly known him, for he had hidden in himself his dominant passion. But now it was nakedly displayed, and they began to glimpse his iron and steel through the elusive nebulousness that had veiled them—as one might see the body of a steam-engine emerge through the clouds of draping smoke its activity has flung round it.

They could not help wondering at his strenuousness, his unlimited capacity for work, though they failed to understand or sympathise with the object that inspired them. Blackman, grumbling and perplexed, had gone off early in March to the milder energies of Raisins Farm; Becky, for want of a place, had married the drover at Kitchenhour—and it was no empty boast of

Reuben's that he would take the greater part of their work on his own shoulders. From half-past four in the morning till nine at night he laboured almost without rest. He drove the cows to pasture, milked them, and stalled them—he followed the plough over the spring-sown crops, he groomed and watered the horses, he fed the fowls, watched the clutches, fattened capons for market—he cleaned the pigsty, and even built a new one in a couple of strenuous days—he bent his back over his spade among the roots, over his barrow, wheeling loads of manure—he was like a man who has been starved and at last finds a square meal before him. He had all the true workman's rewards—the heart-easing ache of tired muscles, the good bath of sweat in the sun's heat, the delicious sprawl, every sinew limp and throbbing, in his bed at nights—and then sleep, dreamless, healing, making new.

But though Reuben bore the brunt of the new enterprise, he had no intention of sparing others their part. All that he by any exertions could do himself he did, but the things which inevitably he could not compass, because he had only two hands, one back, one head, and seven days a week to work in, must be done by others. He showed himself unexpectedly stiff, and Mrs. Backfield and Harry found themselves obeying him as if he were not the son of the one and only a year older than the other. As a matter of fact, custom gave Reuben authority, in spite of his years. He was the master, the eldest son inheriting his father's lordship with his father's farm. Mrs. Backfield and Harry would have been censured by public opinion if they had set themselves against him.

Besides, what was the use?—it was only for a few months, and then Harry would be in a little house of his own, living very like his father, though more dreamily, more delicately. Then Mrs. Backfield would once more wear muslin aprons instead of sacking ones,

would sit with her hands folded, kid shoes on the fender. . . . Sometimes, in the rare moments they had together, Harry would paint this wonderland for her.

He had been left a small sum by his father—resulting from the sale of a water-meadow, and securely banked at Rye. Naomi, moreover, was well dowered; and Tom Gasson, anxious to see the young couple established, had promised to help them start a grass farm in the neighbourhood. The project had so far gone no further than discussion. Reuben was opposed to it—he would have liked Harry to stay on at Odiam after his marriage; Naomi, too, would be useful in many ways, her dowry supplying a much-felt want of capital. However, he realised that in this direction his authority had its limits. He was powerless to prevent Harry leaving Odiam, and there was nothing to do but to wring as much as possible out of him while he stayed. Of his mother's planned escape he knew nothing.

Naomi often came over to Odiam, driving in her father's gig. Reuben disliked her visits, for they meant Harry's abandonment of spade and rake for the weightier matters of love. Reuben, moiling more desperately than ever, would sometimes catch a glimpse of her coloured gown through the bushes of some coppice, or skirting a hedge beside Harry's corduroy. He himself spoke to her seldom. He could not help being conscious of her milky sweetness, the soft droop of her figure under its muslins, her voice full of the music of stock-doves. But he disliked her, partly because she was taking Harry from Odiam, partly because he was jealous of Harry. It ought to be he who was to make a wealthy marriage, not his brother. He chafed to think what Naomi's money might do for the farm if only he had control of it.

Marriage was beginning to enter into his scheme. Some day he must marry and beget children. As the farm grew he would want more hands to work it, and

he would like to think of others carrying on its greatness after he was dead. He must marry a woman with money and with health, and he was not so dustily utilitarian as not also to demand something of youth and good looks.

Since his father's death he had denied himself woman's company, after two years lived in the throb and sweetness of it. A warm and vigorous temperament, controlled by a strong will, had promised a successful libertinism, and more than once he had drunk the extasies of passion without those dregs which spoil it for the more weakly dissolute. But now, with that same fierce strength and relentless purpose which had driven him to do the work of two men, to live hard, and sleep rough, he renounced all the delights which were only just beginning. Henceforth, with his great ambition before him, there could be nothing but marriage—prudent, solid, and constructive. His girl at the Forstal knew him no more, nor any of her kind. He had set himself to build a house, and for the sake of that house there was nothing, whether of his own or of others, that he could not tame, break down, and destroy.

§ 5.

By the end of the year Reuben had saved enough money to buy five acres of Boarzell, in the low grounds down by Totease. He had saved chiefly on the wages of Blackman and Becky, though, against that, he had been forced to engage outside help for the hay in June, and also for the wheat in August. However, he had been lucky enough to secure tramp labour for this, which meant payment largely in barn-room and bread.

Then there had been a host of minor retrenchments, each in itself so small as to be almost useless, but mounting together into something profitable. Chocolate had vanished from the Odiam supper-table, their bread was made of seconds, the genuines being sold to Iden

Mill; they ate no meat on week-days except bacon, and eggs were forbidden in puddings. Reuben managed to get a small sale for his eggs and milk at the Manor and the curate's house, though he had not enough cows and poultry to make his dealing of much advantage.

Mrs. Backfield was the one to bear the brunt of these economies. She had been a trifle pampered during the latter days of her marriage, and set far more store than her sons on dainty food; also the work which she performed so well was a tax on her unaccustomedness. But she never grumbled, and this was not only because escape was near at hand. Strange to say, in these new days of his lordship, Reuben began to fill a place in her heart which he had never filled before. While her husband was alive, he had never really come inside her life, he had been an aloof, inarticulate being whom she did not understand. But now that he had asserted himself, she found herself turning towards him. She would have worked without prospect of release—indeed, as the days went by, Harry and his home and her promised idleness dwindled in her thoughts.

When Reuben told her he could now buy his first piece of Boarzell, she went through the day's work full of joy. Though, as far as the land itself was concerned, she would far rather have had new chintz covers for the parlour chairs.

They never sat in the parlour now.

Harry's pleasure was obviously insincere, just a mask put on out of kindness to his brother. Naomi was coming over on a few days' visit, and everything else was smoke. No one, Reuben reflected, as he walked over to Flightshot to see Sir Miles's agent, no one cared a rap about Boarzell. His mother thought more of her food and of her furniture, thought more of him and Harry, while Harry thought of nothing but Naomi. He would have to wage his fight alone.

The transaction was prompt and satisfactory. Reuben

did not haggle over the price, and was careful to let the agent know of his eagerness to buy more—otherwise, he was afraid that the Squire might either give the land back to the people, pushed by his Liberal politics, or else part with it for a song to some speculator. So he paid really a bit more than the land was worth, and made the agent a confidant of his dreams.

"It'll want a tedious lot of fighting, will that plot," he asserted, to counteract any idea his eagerness might give that Boarzell was a mine of hidden fertility—"Dunno as I shall mäake anything out of it. But it's land I want—want to mäake myself a sort of landed praprietor"—a lie—"and raise the old farm up a bit. I'd like to have the whole of Boarzell. Reckon as Grandturzel 'ud sell me their bit soon as I've got the rest. They'll never mäake anything out of it."

He walked home over Boarzell, scarcely conscious of the ground he trod. He felt like a new-crowned king. As he looked round on the swart hummocks of the Moor, and its crest of firs, dim and bistred against the grey afternoon clouds, he found it hard to realise that it was not all his, that he still had almost the whole of it to fight for, acre by acre. He hurried towards his own little plot, bought, but as yet unconquered, still shagged with gorse and brittle with shards.

It was down in the hollow by Totease, as unpromising an estate as one could wish, all on a slope, gorse-grown at the top, then a layer of bracken, and at the Totease fence a kind of oozy pulp, where a lavant dribbled in and out of the grass; to Reuben, however, it was a land of milk and honey. He turned up the soil of it with his foot, and blessed the wealden clay.

"No flints here," he said; "reckon there's some stiff ground on the hill—but it's only the surface. Heather äun't growing—that's a tedious good sign. I'll have oats here—the best in Peasmarsh."

He stood staring at the grass with its dribbles of

lavant and spines of rushes. The wind brought the sound of someone singing. At first he scarcely noticed, then gradually the song worked in with his daydream, and ended by rousing him out of it. He strolled across his domain, and marked half a dozen sturdy willows which must come out somehow roots and all. He climbed into the bracken zone, and from thence saw Harry sitting by a gorse thicket some hundred yards off with Naomi Gasson.

The wind puffed gently towards him, bringing him the song and the soft peach-smell of the gorse. Harry was a musician already of note among the farms; he had a beautiful voice, and there was very little he could not do with his fiddle, though of late this had been neglected for the claims of work and love. To-day he was singing an old song Reuben knew well—"The Song of Seth's House":

"'The blackbird flew out from the eaves of the Manor,
The Manor of Seth in the Sussex countrie,
And he carried a prayer from the lad of the Manor,
A prayer and a tear to his faithless ladie.

"'To the lady who lives in the Grange by the water,
The water of Iron in the Sussex countrie,
The lad of Seth's House prays for comfort and pity—
Have pity, my true love, have pity on me!

"'O why when we loved like the swallows in April,
Should beauty forget now their nests have grown cold?
O why when we kissed 'mid the ewes on the hanger,
Should you turn from me now that they winter in fold?

"'O why, because sickness hath wasted my body,
Should you do me to death with your dark treacherie?
O why, because brothers and friends all have left me,
Should you leave me too, O my faithless ladie?

"'One day when your pride shall have brought you to sorrow,
And years of despair and remorse been your fate,
Perhaps your cold heart will remember Seth's Manor,
And turn to your true love—and find it too late.'"

Harry's voice was very loud and clear, with that element of wildness which is a compensation for no

training. When he had finished "The Song of Seth's House" he started another, but broke off in the middle of it, and Reuben saw the two heads suddenly droop together, and fuse, the golden hair and the brown.

Naomi leaned against Harry, and his hand stole up and down her arm, stroking its whiteness. Reuben stood watching them, and for a moment he hungered. This was what he had cast away.

He turned from them sharply, and threw himself down on the dead bracken. Then suddenly the hunger passed. The reek of the moist earth rose up in his nostrils; it was the scent of his love, who was sweeter to him than ever Naomi was to Harry. His hand stole over the short, mould-smelling grass, caressing it. He had a love more beautiful than Harry's, whose comeliness would stay unwithered through the years, whose fruitfulness would make him great, whose allure was salted with a hundred dangers. . . . His fingers dug themselves into the earth, and he embraced Boarzell with wide-flung trembling arms. "My land!" he cried —"mine!—mine!"

§ 6.

The neighbourhood sniggered when it heard of Odiam's new land. When it heard of Reuben's plans for it and the oats that were to be it grew openly derisive. The idea of anyone thinking he could grow oats on Boarzell was an excellent joke. Young Backfield, however, ignored public opinion, and bought rape-dust for manure.

He was as jealous of this strip of earth as of a wife—he would allow nobody to work there but himself. Alone and unhelped he grubbed up the bracken, turned the soil, and scattered rape-dust and midden till they had to shut their windows at Burntbarns. He believed that if the ground was properly manured it would be ready for sowing in the autumn. The only difficulty now was

the trees; they were casting malevolent shadows, and dredging up the goodness out of the earth.

Where Ditch of Totease or Vennal of Burntbarns would have taken a couple of woodmen and a saw, Reuben took nothing but an axe and his bare arms. His muscles ached for this new carouse of exertion.

"Let me give you a hand," said Harry that day at dinner.

"No—why should I?"

"You'll never do it yourself," said Naomi, who was spending a few days at Odiam.

"Oh, wöan't I!" and Reuben showed his strong white teeth.

"How many trees are there?"

"Half a dozen—willers. The real trouble will be gitting their roots out."

"And will you do that alone?"

"I'll see about it."

Naomi looked across at Reuben without speaking. Her lips, a pale coral-pink, were parted, showing two tiny teeth. She was not the type he favoured—she was too soft and bloodless—but he could not help feeling flattered by the frank admiration he saw in her eyes. He knew that this last year of wind and sun and healthy work had narrowed the gulf between him and Beautiful Harry. He was as hard as iron and as brown as a nut, and there was a warm red glowing through the swarthiness of his cheeks like the bloom on a russet pear.

Harry looked up from his plate, and the gaze became three-cornered. Reuben, defiant of his brother, grew bold, and ogled, whereupon Naomi grew timid, and dropped her eyes; Harry found himself speaking with a rasp:

"I'm coming to help you, Reuben. You'll never tackle them rootses—it äun't everything you can do surelye!"

"I can do that much. You stay here and play the fiddle to Naomi."

Harry somehow felt he had been insulted, and opened his mouth to retort. But his brother suddenly began talking about an accident to a labourer at Grandturzel, and the occasion dropped.

After dinner Reuben set out with his axe, and Harry and Naomi sat together on the floor beside the kitchen fire. He gave her kisses like the wind, swift and cool. She was the only woman he had kissed, and she had never been kissed by any other man. Their love had its wildnesses, but not the wildnesses of fire—rather of the dancing boughs of some spring-caught wood, rioting together in May. Now and then he would sing as he held her to him, his fresh young voice ringing up to the roof. . . .

Later in the afternoon they went out together. It seemed a pity to stay indoors in the soft swale, and Harry had to look at some poultry at Doozes. Naomi walked with her arm through his, her grey cloak over her shoulders.

"I wonder if Reuben's still at it?" said Harry, as the footpath began to skirt the new land.

"Yes—I see him yonder. He doesn't see us, I reckon."

They stood on the hillside and looked down at Reuben. He had felled five trees, and was now getting his axe into the sixth. They watched him in silence, and Naomi found herself remembering the way he had looked at her at dinner.

"He's a valiant man," said Harry.

Naomi saw him sweep the axe above his shoulder, and the ease and strength of his swing gave her a strange tingling sensation in her breast. The axe crashed into the wood, then Reuben pulled it up, and the muscles of his back made two long, ovoid lumps under his blue shirt. Again the axe swung and fell, again

Naomi's body tingled as with a physical exhilaration.

The January twilight deepened, and soon Reuben's blue shirt was all that was clear in the hollow. The bites of the axe cracked out on the still air—and suddenly with a soft swish of boughs the tree fell.

§ 7.

That night Reuben came to supper as hungry as a wolf. He was in a fine good humour, for his body, pleasantly tired, glowing, aching, tickled with the smell of food, was giving him a dozen agreeable sensations.

"Got some splendid fire-wood fur you, mother," he said after a few minutes' silence enforced by eating.

"And wot about the rootses?" asked Harry, "wull you be digging those out to-morrer? It'll be an unaccountable tough job."

"Oh, I've found a way of gitting shut of them rootses—thought of it while I wur working at the trees. I'm going to blast 'em out."

"Blast 'em!"

"Yes. Blast 'em wud gunpowder. I've heard of its being done. I'd never dig all the stuff out myself—yards of it there be—willer rootses always wur hemmed spready."

"It's never bin done in these parts."

"Well, it'll be done now, surelye. It'll show the folk here I mean business—and that I'm a chap wud ideas."

There was indeed a mild excitement in the farms round Boarzell when Reuben's new plan became known. In those times gunpowder was seldom used for such purposes, and the undertaking was looked upon as a treat and a display. . . .

"Backfield's going to bust up his willer-rootses—fine sight it'll be—like as not blow his own head off—I'll be there to see."

So when Reuben came to his territory the next after-

noon he found a small crowd assembled—Ditch, Ginner, Realf of Grandturzel, Coalbran of Doozes, Pilcher of Birdseye, with a sprinkling of their wives, families, and farm-hands. He himself had brought Naomi, and Harry was to join them when he came back from an errand to Moor's Cottage. Reuben felt a trifle important and in need of spectators. This was to be the crowning act of conquest. When those roots were shattered away there would be nothing but time and manure between him and the best oat-crop in Peasmarsh.

A quarter of an hour passed, and there was no sign of Harry. Reuben grew impatient, for he wanted to have the ground tidied up by sunset. It was a wan, mould-smelling afternoon, and already the sun was drifting through whorls of coppery mist towards the shoulder of Boarzell. Reuben looked up to the gorse-clump on the ridge, from behind which he expected Harry to appear.

"I can't wait any longer," he said to Naomi, "something's kept him."

"He'll be disappointed," said Naomi softly.

"I can't help that—the sun's near down, and I must have everything präaper by dark."

He went to where the fuse lay like a snake in the grass, and struck his flint.

"Stand back everybody; I'm going to start her."

The group huddled back a few yards. The little flame writhed along towards the stump. There was silence. Reuben stood a little way in front of the others, leaning forward with eager, parted lips.

Suddenly Naomi cried out:

"There's Harry!"

A shadow appeared against the copper sky, and ran towards them down the hill.

For a moment nobody seemed to realise what was boding. Then they heard a shout that sounded like "Wait for me!" Naomi felt something rise in her throat and sear the roof of her mouth like a hot cinder.

She tried to scream, but her parched tongue would not move. She staggered forward, but Reuben flung her back.

"Stop!" he shouted.

Harry did not seem to hear.

"Stop!" yelled Reuben again. Then he cried, "Stand back!" to the crowd, and ran towards his brother.

But it was too late. There was a sudden roar, a sheet of flame, a crash, a dreadful scream, and then a far more dreadful silence.

One or two flames sang out of a hole in the ground, but scarcely anything could be seen for the pall of smoke that hung over Boarzell, black, and evil-smelling. The fumes made men choke, then they shuddered and drew together, for through the smell of smoke and gunpowder came the horrible smell of burnt flesh.

Reuben was lying on his face a few yards in front of the others. For some seconds nobody moved. Then Backfield slowly raised himself on his arms.

"I'm not hurt," he said in a shaking voice.

"Harry!" cried Naomi, as if someone were strangling her.

Reuben tottered to his feet. His face was black, and he was still half stunned by the explosion.

"Harry!" cried Naomi—and then fainted.

The smoke clouds were lifting, and now everyone could see a smouldering object that lay close to the hole, among bits of wood and stone.

Reuben ran towards it, Ditch and Realf followed him. The others huddled stupidly together like sheep.

"His clothes are still burning—here, help me, you!" cried Reuben, beating at the flames with his hands.

"He's dead," said Realf.

"Oh Lord!" wailed Ditch—"Oh Lord!"

"He's bin hit on the head wud a piece of wood. I reckon he died painlessly. All this came afterwards."

"Wipe the blood off his face."

"Tell his poor girl he died wudout suffering."

"He äun't dead," said Reuben.

He had torn off the rags from his brother's heart, and felt it beating.

"He äun't dead."

"Oh Lord!" wailed Ditch.—"Oh Lord!"

"Here, you chaps, fetch a gëat and put him on it—and döan't let Naomi see him."

Naomi had been taken back to Odiam, when Harry, still motionless and apparently dead, was lifted on a gate, and borne away. Dark curds of smoke drifted among the willows, and the acrid smell of powder clung to the hillside like an evil ghost. The place where Harry had lain was marked by charred and trampled grass, and a great pool of blood was sinking into the ground . . . it seemed to Reuben, as he turned shudderingly away, as if Boarzell were drinking it up—eagerly, greedily, as a thirsty land drinks up its first watering.

§ 8.

Dr. Espinette from Rye stood glumly by Harry's bed. His finger lay on the fluttering pulse, and his eye studied the little of the sick man's face that could be seen between its bandages.

"It's a bad business," he said at last; "that wound in the head's the worst of it. The burns aren't very serious in themselves. You must keep him quiet, and I'll call again to-morrow morning."

"When ull he wäake up?" asked Mrs. Backfield in the feeble voice her tears had left her.

"I don't know—it may be in an hour or two, it mayn't be for a week."

"A week!"

"I've known them unconscious longer than that. But, cheer up, ma'am—we're not going to let him slip past us."

The doctor went away, and after a time Reuben was able to persuade his mother to go and lie down in the next room. He had quite recovered from the shock of the explosion; indeed, he was now the only calm person in the house. He sat down by Harry's bed, gazing at the unconscious face.

How horrible everything had been! How horrible everything was still, with that loggish, inanimate thing lying there, all that was left of Beautiful Harry. Reuben wondered if he would die. If so, he had killed him—he had ignored his own inexperience and played splashy tricks with his new land. But no—he had not killed him—it was Boarzell, claiming a victim in the signal-rite of its subjection. He remembered how that thirsty ground had drunk up Harry's blood. Perhaps it would drink up much more blood before he had done with it—perhaps it would one day drink up his blood. . . . A vague, a sudden, a ridiculous fear clutched his thoughts; for the first time he felt afraid of the thing he had set out to conquer—for the first time Boarzell was not just unfruitful soil, harsh heather clumps and gorse-roots—it was something personal, opposing, vindictive, blood-drinking.

He sprang to his feet and began pacing up and down the room. The window square was black. He was glad he could not see Boarzell with its knob of firs. Gradually the motion of his legs calmed his thoughts, he fell to pondering more ordinary things—had his mother remembered to stand the evening's milk in the cream pans? She had probably forgotten all about the curate's butter to be delivered the next morning. What had Harry done about those mangolds at Moor's Cottage? Durn it! He would have to do all the work of the farm to-morrow—how he was to manage things he didn't know, what with the dairy and the new chicks and the Alderney having garget. He stopped pacing, and chin in hand was considering the expediency of

engaging outside help, when a voice from the bed cried feebly :

" Oh ! "

Reuben went to Harry's side, and bent over him.

" Oh," moaned his brother, " oh !—oh ! "

" I'm here, old feller," said Reuben with a clumsy effort at tenderness.

" Bring a light, do—I can't abide this dark."

Reuben fetched the candle to the bedside.

" Where's Naomi ? "

" She's asleep. Do you want her ? "

" No—let her sleep. But bring me a light fur marcy's sake."

" I've brought it—it's here by the bed."

" I can't see it."

" You must—it's right in your eyes."

" I can't—oh ! "

He started up in bed and gripped his brother's hand. He thrust his head forward, his eyeballs straining.

" Take it away ! take it away ! " he screamed.

" Wot ? " cried Reuben, sick with the new-born terror.

" That black stuff in front of my eyes. Take it away ! Take it away ! "

He tore his hand free, and began clawing and beating at his face.

Reuben's teeth were chattering.

" Kip calm, lad—kip calm. There's naun there, naun, I tell you."

" Oh, oh ! "—screamed Harry—" Oh, oh, oh ! "

The outcry brought Mrs. Backfield from the next room, Naomi shivering in her wake. Reuben was trying to hold Harry down in bed.

Through the long night they wrestled with him, blind and raving. At first it seemed as if Naomi's presence soothed him, and he would let her stroke his arms and hands. But after a time he ceased to recog-

nise her. He gabbled about her a good deal, but did not know she was there. His delirium was full of strange tags—a chicken brood he was raising, a sick cow, a jaunt into Rye with Realf of Grandturzel, a dozen harmless homely things which were all transfused with an alien horror, all somehow made frightful, so that Reuben felt he could never look on chickens, cows, or Rye again without a shudder.

Sometimes there were crises of extraordinary violence when he was with difficulty held down in bed, and these at last wore him out. Towards dawn he fell into a troubled sleep.

Naomi slept too, huddled in a chair, every now and then a sob quivering through her. The winter dawn slowly crept in on her, showing her pitiful figure—showing Mrs. Backfield sick and puffy with tears, Reuben dry-eyed beside the bed, and Harry respited in sleep. Outside the crest of Boarzell was once more visible in the growing light—dark, lumpish, malevolent, against the kindling of the sky.

§ 9.

The next few days were terrible, in the house and on the farm. Indoors the women nursed Harry, and outdoors Reuben did double work, sleeping at night in an arm-chair by his brother's side.

Harry had recovered consciousness, but it could not be said that he had "come to himself." "Beautiful Harry," with all his hopes and ardours, his dreams and sensibilities, had run away like a gipsy, and in his place was a new Harry, blind and mad, who moaned and laughed, with stony silences, and now and then strange fits of struggling as if the runaway gipsy strove to come back.

Dr. Espinette refused to say whether this state was permanent or merely temporary. Neither could he be sure whether it was due to his injuries or to the shock

of finding himself blind. Reuben felt practically convinced that his brother was sane during the few moments he had spoken to him alone, but the doctor seemed doubtful.

Reuben was glad to escape into his farm work. The atmosphere of sickness was like a cloud, which grew blacker and blacker the nearer one came to its heart. Its heart was that little room in the gable, where he spent those wretched nights, disturbed by Harry's moaning. Out of doors, in the yard or the cowshed or the stable, he breathed a cleaner atmosphere. The heaviness, the vague remorse, grew lighter. And strange to say, out on Boarzell, which was the cause of his trouble, they grew lightest of all.

Somehow out there was a wider life, a life which took no reck of sickness or horror or self-reproach. The wind which stung his face and roughed his hair, the sun which tanned his nape as he bent to his work, the smell of the earth after rain, the mists that brewed in the hollows at dusk, and at dawn slunk like spirits up to the clouds . . . they were all part of something too great to take count of human pain—so much greater than he that in it he could forget his trouble, and find ease and hope and purpose—even though he was fighting it.

He mildly scandalised his neighbours by blasting—privately this time—the tree stumps yet in the ground. According to their ethics he should have accepted Harry's accident as the voice of Providence and abstained from his outlandish methods—also some felt that it was a matter of delicacy and decent feeling not to repeat that which had had such dire consequences for his brother. " I wonder he can bear to do it," said Ginner, when ' Bang ! Bang ! ' came over the hummocks to Socknersh.

But Reuben did it because he was not going to be beaten in any respect by his land. He was not going to accept defeat in the slightest instance. So he blew up

the stumps, tidied the ground, and spread manure—and more manure—and yet more manure.

Manure was his great idea at that moment. He had carefully tilled and turned the soil, and he fed it with manure as one crams chickens. It was of poor quality marl, mostly lime on the high ground, with a larger proportion of clay beside the ditch. Reuben's plan was to fatten it well before he sowed his seed. Complaints of his night-soil came all the way from Grandturzel; Vennal, humorously inclined, sent him a bag of rotten fish; on the rare occasions his work allowed him to meet other farmers at the Cocks, his talk was all of lime, guano, and rape-cake, with digressions on the possibilities of seaweed. He was manure mad.

The neighbours despised and mistrusted his enthusiasm. There he was, thinking of nothing but his land, when Harry, his only brother, lay worse than dying. But Reuben often thought of Harry.

One thing he noticed, and that was that the housework was always done for him by his mother as if there were no sickness to fill her time. Always when he came home of an evening, his supper was waiting for him, hot and savoury. He breakfasted whenever he had a mind, and there were slices of cold pie or dabs of bread and meat for him to take out and eat as he worked—he had no time to come home to dinner now. Really his mother was tumbling to things wonderfully well—she looked a little tired sometimes, it is true, and the lines of her face were growing thinner, but she was saving him seven shillings a month and the girl's food; and all that money and food was feeding the hungry earth.

Naomi helped her with the nursing, and also a little about the house. She had refused to go home to Rye, though Harry did not seem to recognise her.

"For sometimes," she said, "I think he does."

§ 10.

Towards the middle of February a change took place in Harry. At first it was little more than a faint creep of life, putting a little glow in his cheeks, a little warmth in his blood. Then the wounds which had been healing so slowly began to heal quickly, his appetite returned, and he slept long and sweetly at nights.

Mrs. Backfield's hope rekindled, but the doctor soon damped it down. This sudden recrudescence of physical health was a bad sign, for there was no corresponding revival of intellect, and now the prostration of the body could no longer account for the aberration of the mind. It was unlikely that Harry would ever recover his wits—the injuries to his skull, either with or without the shock of his blindness, had definitely affected his brain. The strong, clear will, the gay spirits, the quick understanding, the tender sensibilities which had made him so bright and lovable a being, were gone—how much of shreds and scraps they had left behind them to build up the semblance of a man, did not yet appear.

His looks would be only slightly marred. It was the optic nerve which had been destroyed, and so far there was nothing ugly in the eyes themselves, except their vacant rolling. The eyelashes and eyebrows had been burnt off, but they were growing again, and a scar on his cheek and another on his forehead were not likely to show much in a few weeks' time. But all the life, the light, the soul had gone out of his face—it was like a house which had been gutted, with walls and roof still standing, yet with its essential quality gone from it, a ruin.

Reuben thought long and anxiously about his brother. He did not speak much of him to his mother or Naomi, for he knew that they would not understand the problem that confronted him. He felt worn by the extra load of work, and his brain fretted, spoiling his good sleep. He

was back in his own room now, but he slept worse than in Harry's; he would lie awake fighting mentally, just as all day he had fought physically—life was a continuous fight.

It was hard that just at the outset of his enterprise, fresh obstacles should be thrown in his way. He saw that it was practically impossible for him to go on working as he did; already he was paying for it in stiff muscles, loss of appetite, fitful sleep, and drugged wakings. Also he was growing irritable and frayed as to temper. If he went on much longer doing the work of three men—he had always done the work of two—he would end by breaking up completely, and then what would become of Odiam? He would have to engage outside help, and that would mean quite ten shillings a week—ten shillings a week, two pounds a month, twenty-six pounds a year, the figures were like blisters in his head during the long restless nights. They throbbed and throbbed through his dreams. He would have to spend twenty-six pounds a year, just when he was saving so desperately to buy more land and fatten what he already had. And in addition he would have to pay for Harry's keep. Not only must he engage a man to do his work, but he would have to support in absolute idleness Harry himself. He was quite unfit for farm work, he would be nothing but an expense and an incubus.

In those dark furious hours, Reuben would wish his brother had died. It was not as if life could be sweet to him. It was terrible to see him mouching and mumbling about the house, to hold even the brief converse with him which everyday life enforced. He had not as yet grown used to his blindness, indeed it would be difficult for him to do so without wits to stimulate and direct his other senses, and it was dreadful to see him tumbling over furniture, breaking things and crying afterwards, spilling food on his clothes and his

beard—for now that he could not shave himself, and others had no time to do it for him, he wore a large fair beard, which added to his uncouthness.

Oh that his brother had died!

One day Reuben was so tired that he fell asleep over his supper. His mother cleared the table round him, glancing at him with fond, submissive eyes. Each day she had come to love him more, with an obedient love, almost instinctive and elemental, which she had never felt for the gentle husband or considerate son. This evening she laid her shawl over his shoulders, and went to her washing-up.

Suddenly a weird noise came from the parlour, a strange groaning and wailing. Reuben woke up, and rubbed his eyes. What was that? It was horrible, it was uncanny—and for him it also had that terrifying unnaturalness which a sudden waking gives even to the most ordinary sounds.

Then gradually out of the horror beauty began to grow. The sound passed into an air, faltering at first, then flowing—"Dearest Ellen," on Harry's violin.

"I'm glad he's found something to amuse him, poor soul," said Mrs. Backfield, coming in to see if Reuben had waked.

"He's not playing badly, is he, mother?"

"Not at all. They say as sometimes blind folk are unaccountable good at music."

Reuben did not answer; she knew by his attitude—chin in hand—that he was thinking.

That night he thought it out.

Munds of Starvecrow had had a brother who fiddled at fairs and weddings and earned, so Munds said, thirty pounds a year. He had also heard of others who made as good a thing of it. If Harry earned thirty pounds a year he would pay the wages of an extra farm-hand and also something towards his own keep. They must find out exactly how many of the old tunes he remem-

bered, and get somebody musical to teach him new ones.

The idea prospered in Reuben's thoughts that night. The next morning he was full of it, and confided it to his mother and Naomi.

Naomi, a little paler and more wistful than of old, still spent an occasional day or two at Odiam. At first she had made these visits for Harry's sake, flattering herself that he was the better for her presence; then when even her faith began to fail, she still came, partly to help Mrs. Backfield, partly driven by such feelings as might drive an uneasy ghost to haunt the house of his tragedy. Reuben saw little of her, for his work claimed him, but he liked to feel she was there, helping his mother with work which it was difficult for her to carry through alone to Odiam's best advantage.

She heard of Reuben's plan with some shrinking.

"He—he wouldn't like it," she stammered after a pause.

"You'll never go sending our Harry to fiddle at fairs," said Mrs. Backfield.

"Why not? There's naun shameful in it. Munds's brother did it for twenty years. And think of the difference it'll mäake to us—thirty pound or so a year, instead of the dead loss of Harry's keep and the wages of an extra man beside. I tell you, mother, I wur fair sick about the farm till I thought of this."

"It's always the farm wud you, Reuben. You might sometimes think of your own kin."

"I tell you Harry wöan't mind—he'll like it. It'll be something to occupy him. Besides, hem it all, mother! you can't expect me to kip him idling here, wud the farm scarce started yet, and nearly the whole of Boarzell still to buy."

But it was useless to expect either Mrs. Backfield or Naomi to appreciate the momentousness of his task. Were women always, he wondered, without ambition?

However, though they did not sympathise, they would not oppose him—Naomi because she was not skilful at opposition, his mother because he was gradually taking the place of Harry in her heart.

He had more trouble when a day or so later he asked Naomi to inspect Harry's musical equipment.

"You see, I döan't know one tune from another, so I can't do it myself. You might git him to play one or two things over to you, Naomi, and find out what he remembers."

"I'd rather not," said Naomi, shuddering.

"Why?"

"Oh—I just can't."

"But why?"

She could not tell him. If he did not understand how every note from Harry's violin would jab and tear the tortured memories she was trying to put to sleep—if he did not understand that of himself, she would never be able to explain it to him.

As a matter of fact he did understand, but he was resolute.

"Help me, Naomi," he pleaded, "fur I can't manage wudout you."

His eyes searched her face. People who met him only casually were generally left with the impression that he had black eyes, but as a matter of fact they were dark blue. A hidden power forced Naomi's eyes to meet them . . . they were narrow and deep-set, with extraordinarily long lashes. She gazed into them for a moment without speaking. Then suddenly her own filled with an expression of hatred, and she ran out of the room.

But he had won his point. That evening Naomi made Harry play over his "tunes," while Reuben sat in the chimney corner watching them both. Harry's memory was erratic—he would play through some well-known airs quite correctly up to a certain point, and then

interpolate hysterical variations of his own. At other times memory failed him altogether, but his natural quickness of ear seemed to have increased since his blindness, and it only needed Naomi to sing the passage over for him to fill up the gaps.

She took him through "The Woodpecker Tapping," "Dearest Ellen," "I'd mourn the hopes that leave me," "The Song of Seth's House," and "The Blue Bells of Scotland." Each one of them was torment to her gentle heart, as it woke memory after memory of courtship—on the gorse-slopes of Boarzell, among the chasing shadows of Iden Wood, on the Rother marshes by Thornsdale, where the river slinks up from the Five-watering . . . or in this very kitchen here, where the three of them, divided from one another by dizzy gaps of suffering, desire and darkness, were gathered together in a horrible false association.

But Harry's face was blank, no memories seemed to stir for him, he just fiddled on, now and then receiving Naomi's corrections with an outbreak of childish temper. On these occasions Reuben would stamp his foot and speak to him in a loud, angry voice which inevitably made him behave himself.

Naomi always took advantage of these returns to docility, but later that evening in the dairy, she suddenly swung round on Mrs. Backfield and exclaimed petulently:

"I hate that Ben of yours!"

§ 11.

Harry made good progress, and Reuben decided that he was to start his career at the October Fair. There had been a fiddler at the Fair for years, partly for the lasses and lads to dance to, partly for the less Bacchic entertainments of their elders. It was at the Fair that men took his measure, and engaged him accordingly for weddings and such festivals. Luck would have it that

for the last two years there had been no official fiddler—old Abel Pinch having been seduced by a semi-urban show, which wandered round London, camping on waste grounds and commons. The musical element had been supplied by strays, and Reuben had no doubt but that he should now be able to instal his brother honourably as chief musician.

He advertised him in the neighbourhood for some weeks beforehand, and gossip ran high. Condemnation of Backfield's ruthlessness in exploiting his brother was combined with a furtive admiration of his smartness as a business man. It was extraordinary how little he cared about " lowering himself," a vital matter with the other farmers of his position. Just as he had thought nothing of working his own farm instead of indulging in the dignity of hired labour, so he thought nothing of making money at Boarzell Fair with the gipsies and pikers.

Naomi no longer protested. For one thing Harry seemed to like his fiddling, and was quite overjoyed at the prospect of playing at the Fair. Strangely enough, he remembered the Fair and its jollities, though he had forgotten all weightier matters of life and love.

" Where shall I stand ?—by the gipsies' tent ?—or right forrard by the stalls ? I'd like to stand by the stalls, and then maybe when I'm not fiddling they'll give me sweeties."

" You must behave yourself," said Reuben, in the tones he would have used to a child—" you mustn't go vrothering people to give you sweeties."

" I'll give you some sweeties, Harry," said Naomi.

" Oh, will you ?—Then I'll love you ! "

Naomi turned away with a shudder, her eyes full of inexpressible pain.

Reuben looked after her as she went out of the room, then he took a couple of strides and caught her up in the passage.

" It's I who'm täaking you to the Fair, remember," he said, his hand on her arm.

" Oh, no . . . I couldn't go to the Fair."

" Nonsense—you're coming wud me."

" Oh, Ben, don't make me go."

It was the cry of her weakness to his purpose.

" I shall mäake you . . . dear."

She flung herself from him, and ran upstairs. That night at supper she took no notice of him, talking garrulously all the time to Mrs. Backfield.

But she went to the Fair.

In the soft grey gown that the first of the cold demanded she walked with her arm through Reuben's up the Moor. Her bonnet was the colour of heather, tied with wide ribbons that accentuated the milkiness of her chin. Reuben wore his Sunday clothes—drab shorts and a sprigged waistcoat, and a wide-brimmed hat under which his face looked strangely handsome and dark. Harry shuffled along, clutching his brother's coat-sleeve to guide himself. Mrs. Backfield preferred to stay at home, and Reuben had not tried to make her come.

All Peasmarsh went to the Fair. It was a recognised holiday. All farm work—except the most barely necessary—was put aside, and the ploughman and dairymaid rollicked with their betters. The road across Boarzell was dark with them, coming from all quarters —Playden, Iden, Beckley, Northiam, Bodiam—Old Turk's Farm, Baron's Grange, Corkwood, Kitchenhour —even from Blackbrook and Ethnam on the Kentish border.

The tents and stalls were blocked as usual round the central crest of pines. It was all much as it had been five years ago on the day of the Riot. There was the outer fringe of strange dwellings—tents full of smoke and sprawling squalling children, tilt carts with soup-pots hanging from their axles over little fires, and

gorgeously painted caravans which stood out aristocratically amidst the prevalent sacking. There was a jangle of voices—the soft Romany of the gipsies, the shriller cant of the pikers and half-breeds, the broad drawling Sussex of the natives. Head of all the Fair, and superintending the working of the crazy merry-go-round, was Gideon Teazel, a rock-like man, son, he said, of a lord and a woman of the Rosamescros or Hearnes. He stood six foot eight in his boots and could carry a heifer across his shoulders. His wife Aurora, a pure-bred gipsy, told fortunes, and was mixed up in more activities than would appear from her sleepy manner or her invariable position, pipe in mouth, on the steps of her husband's caravan. Gideon loved to display his devotion for her by grotesque endearments and elephantine caresses—due no doubt to the gaujo strain in him, for the true gipsies always treated their women in public as chattels or beasts of burden, though privately they were entirely under their thumbs.

Reuben brought Naomi and Harry into the middle of the Fair. Many people stared at them. It was Harry's first public appearance since his illness, and one or two comments louder than the general hum came to Naomi's ears and made them pink.

Harry was soon established on the upturned cask beside the fighting booth which had always been the fiddler's place. He began to play at once—"Nice Young Maidens"—to all appearances quite indifferent to the jostle round him. Naomi could not help marvelling at Reuben, too—he was so cool, possessed and assured, so utterly without anything in the way of embarrassment or self-consciousness.

Wonder was succeeded by wrath—how dare he be calm in the face of such terrible things? She tried to pull her hand out of his arm, but he held his elbow close to his side, and the little hand lay there like an imprisoned mouse.

"Let's go away," she whispered, half nervously and half angrily, "I hate standing here."

"I want to see how he's going to manage," said Reuben. "What'll he do when he comes to the end of this tune?"

"Oh, do let's go away."

He did not answer, but stood there imperturbable, till Harry, having successfully finished "Nice Young Maidens," started "The Woodpecker Tapping" without any ado.

"He's safe enough now—we may as well go and have a look round."

Naomi followed him out of the little crowd which had grouped round Harry, and they wandered into the Panorama tent to see the show. After having sat for half an hour on a crowded bench, in an atmosphere thick with foul tobacco and the smell of clothes long stored away—watching "The Coronation of Queen Victoria" and "Scenery on the West Coast of Scotland" rumble slowly past with many creaks—they moved on to the sparring booth, where Buck Washington, now a little knotted and disabled by a bout of rheumatism, arranged scraps between the ploughboys of the neighbouring farms.

Unluckily, the object of sparring, as practised locally, was to draw as much blood from the adversary as possible. The combatants went straight for each others' noses, in spite of the conjurations of Buck, and Naomi soon exercised her privilege as a town girl, and said she felt faint. Reuben took her out, and they walked round the stalls, at one of which he bought her a cherry ribbon for her fairing. At another they bought gingerbread. Gradually her spirits began to revive—she applauded his power at the shooting gallery, and when they came to the cocoanut shie, she was laughing out loud.

Reuben seemed to have an endless supply of money.

He, whom she had seen deny himself white bread and tobacco, and scold his mother if she used eggs to make a pudding, did not seem now to care how much he spent for her amusement. He vowed, laughing, that she should not leave the shie till she had brought down a nut, and the showman pocketed pennies till he grinned from ear to ear, while Naomi threw the wooden balls in all directions, hitting the showman and the spectators and once even Reuben himself. At last he took her arm, and putting himself behind her managed after one or two attempts to guide a successful throw. They went off laughing with her prize, and came once more to the open ground where Harry was still playing his fiddle.

Evidently he had pleased the multitude, for there was now a thick crowd in the central space, and already dancing had begun. Farm-hands in clean smocks, with bright-coloured handkerchiefs round their necks, gambolled uncouthly with farm-girls in spotted and striped muslins. Young farmers' wives, stiff with the sedateness of their bridehead, were drawn into reluctant capers. Despairing virgins renewed their hope, and tried wives their liveliness in unaccustomed arms. Even the elders danced, stumping together on the outskirts of the whirl as long as their breath allowed them.

Harry played " The Song of Seth's House," which in spite of—or because of—its sadness was a good dancing tune. There was no definite step, just anything the dancers fancied. Some kicked up their heels vigorously, others slid them sedately, some held their partners by the hand, others with both arms round their waist.

Then suddenly Naomi found herself in the thick of the crowd, at once crushed and protected by Reuben's six foot three of strength. At first she was shocked, chilled—she had never danced at a fair before, and it seemed dreadful to be dancing here with Reuben while Harry fiddled. But gradually the jovial movement, the vigour and gay spirits of her partner, wore down her

reluctance. Once more she was impressed by that entire absence of self-consciousness and false pride which characterised him. After all, why should they not dance here together? Why should they stand glum while everyone else was merrymaking? Harry did not notice them, and if he did he would not care.

"The blackbird flew out from the eaves of the Manor,
The Manor of Seth in the Sussex countrie,
And he carried a prayer from the lad of the Manor,
A prayer and a tear to his faithless ladie."

She found herself bending to the rhythm of the music, swaying in Reuben's arms. He held her lightly, and it was wonderful how clever he was in avoiding concussion with the other dancers, most of whom bumped about regardless of anybody else.

"To the lady who lives in the Grange by the water,
The water of Iron in the Sussex countrie,
The lad of Seth's House prays for comfort and pity—
Have pity, my true love, have pity on me!"

A sudden weariness passed over Naomi, and Reuben led her out of the dance and brought her a drink of mild icy ale. He did not offer to take her home, and she did not ask to go. If he had offered she would have gone, but she had no will of her own—all desire, all initiative was drowned in the rhythm of the dance and the sadness of the old tune.

"O why when we loved like the swallows in April,
Should beauty forget now their nests have grown cold?
O why when we kissed 'mid the ewes on the hanger,
Should you turn from me now that they winter in fold?"

He led her back into the crowd, and once more she felt his arms round her, so light, so strong, while her feet spun with his, tricked by magic. She became acutely conscious of his presence—the roughness of his coat-sleeve, the faint scent of the sprigged waistcoat, which had been folded away in lavender. And all the

while she had another picture of him in her heart, not in his Sunday best, but in corduroys and the blue shirt which had stood out of the January dusk, the last piece of colour in the day. She remembered the swing of his arm, the crash of the axe on the trunk, the bending of his back as he pulled it out, the muscles swelled under the skin . . . and then the tingling creep in her own heart, that sudden suffocating thrill which had come to her there beside Harry in the gloam. . . .

The dusk was falling now, splashed by crude flares over the stalls, and once more that creep—delicious, tingling, suffocating—was in her heart, the intoxication of the weak by the strong. It seemed as if he were holding her closer. She grew warm, and yet she would not stop. There was sweat on her forehead, she felt her woollen gown sticking to her shoulders—but she would not rest. The same old tune jigged on—it was good to dance to, and Harry liked playing it.

" O why, because sickness hath wasted my body,
Should you do me to death with your dark treacherie ?
O why, because brothers and friends all have left me,
Should you leave me too, O my faithless ladie ? "

The dance was becoming more of a rout. Hats fell back, even Naomi's heather-coloured bonnet became disorderly. Kerchiefs were crumpled and necks bare. Arms grew tighter, there were few merely clasping hands now. Then a lad kissed his partner on the neck while they danced, and soon another couple were spinning round with lips clinging together. The girls' hair grew rough and blew in their boys' eyes—there were sounds of panting—of kissing—Naomi grew giddy, round her was a whirl of colour, hands, faces, the dusk and flaring lights. She clung closer to Reuben, and his arms tightened about her.

" One day when your pride shall have brought you to sorrow,
And years of despair and remorse been your fate,
Perhaps your cold heart will remember Seth's Manor,
And turn to your true love—and find it too late."

§ 12.

Reuben was pleased with the results of that Fair Day. Harry had been a complete success. Even on the day itself he was engaged to fiddle at a local wedding, and thenceforth no festival was complete without him. He became the fashion in Peasmarsh. His birth and family gave proceedings an air of gentility, and his tragic story imparted romance. Also his real musical gifts were appreciated by some, as well as his tirelessness and good nature. Occasionally he would have fits of crazy ill-temper, but only required firm handling. Reuben saw that his brother, instead of being entirely on the debit side of Odiam's accounts, would add materially to its revenues. He became exceedingly kind to Harry, and gave him apples and sweets.

That autumn he had sown his oats. He sowed English Berlie, after wavering for some time between that and Barbachlaw. Quantities of rape cake had been delivered in the furrows with the seed, and now the fields lay, to the eye, wet and naked—to the soul, to Reuben's farmer-soul, full of the hidden promise which should sprout with May.

He had a man to help him on the farm, Beatup, an uncouth coltish lad, with an unlimited capacity for work. Reuben never let him touch the new ground, but kept him busy in barn and yard with the cattle. Mrs. Backfield worked in the house as usual, and she now also had charge of the poultry; for Reuben having given them up to her when he was single-handed, had not taken them back—he had to look after Beatup, who wanted more watching than Harry, and he also had bought two more pigs as money-makers. He was saving, stinting, scraping to buy more land.

Mrs. Backfield sometimes had Naomi to help her. Naomi often came to stay at Odiam. She did not know why she came; it was not for love of Mrs. Backfield,

and the sight of Harry wrung her heart. She had fits of weeping alternating with a happy restlessness.

Ever since the day of the Fair a strange feeling had possessed her, sometimes just for fitful moments, sometimes for long days of panic—the feeling of being pursued. She felt herself being hunted, slowly, but inevitably, by one a dozen times more strong, more knowing, more stealthy than herself. She heard his footsteps in the night, creeping after her down long labyrinths of thought, sometimes his shadow sped before her with her own. And she knew that one day he would seize her—though she struggled, wept and fled, she knew that one day she would be his at last, and of her own surrender. The awful part of that seizing would be that it would be a matter of her will as well as his. . . .

She was afraid of Reuben, she fled before him like a poor little lamb, trembling and bleating—and yet she would sometimes long for the inevitable day when he would grasp her and fling her across his shoulders.

She could not discipline her attitude towards him—sometimes she was composed, distant even in her thoughts; at others a kind of delirious excitement possessed her, she flushed and held down her head in his presence, could not speak to him, and groped blindly for escape. She would, on these occasions, end by returning to Rye, but away from Reuben a restless misery tormented her, driving her back to Odiam.

She sometimes asked herself if she loved him, and in cold blood there was only one answer to that question —No. What she felt for him was not love, but obsession —if she had never loved she might have mistaken it, but with her memories of Harry she could not. And the awful part of it was that her heart was still Harry's, though everything else was Reuben's. Her desires, her thoughts, her will were all Reuben's—by a slow remorseless process he was making them his own—but her heart,

the loving, suffering part of her, was still Harry's, and might always be his.

She was not continuously conscious of this—sometimes she forgot Harry, sometimes he repulsed her, often she was afraid of him. But in moments of quiet her heart always gave her the same message, like distant music, drowned in a storm.

One day she was in the dairy at Odiam, skimming the cream-pans. The sunshine, filtered to a watery yellow by the March afternoon, streamed in on her, putting a yellow tinge into her white skin and white apron. Her hair was the colour of fresh butter, great pats and cakes of which stood on the slabs beside her. There was a smell of butter and standing milk in the cold, rather damp air. Naomi skimmed the cream off the pans and put it into a brown bowl.

Suddenly she realised that Reuben had come into the dairy, and was standing beside her, a little way behind.

"Hullo, Ben," she said nervously—it was one of her nervous days.

"How's the cream to-day?"

"Capital."

He dipped his finger into the pan, and sucked it.

"Oughtn't it to stand a bit longer?"

"I don't think so."

"Taste it——"

He dipped his finger again, and suddenly thrust it between her lips.

She drew her head away almost angrily, and moved to the next pan.

Then he stooped and kissed her quite roughly on the neck, close to the nape.

She cried out and turned round on him, but he walked out of the dairy.

For a moment Naomi stood stockish, conscious only of two sensations in her body—the taste of cream on her lips, and a little cold place at the back of her neck.

She began to tremble, then suddenly the colour left her cheeks, for in the doorway of the wash-house, three yards off, stood Harry.

He did not move, and for some unaccountable reason she felt sure that he knew Reuben had kissed her. A kind of sickness crept up to her heart; she held out her hands before her, and tottered a little. She felt faint.

"Harry!" she called.

He came shuffling up to her, and for a moment stood straining his blind eyes into her face.

"Harry—will you—will you take this basin of cream to your mother?"

He was still looking into her eyes, and she was visited by a terrible feeling that came to her sometimes and went as quickly—that he was not so mad as people thought.

"Will you take it?"

He nodded.

She gave him the cream bowl. Their hands accidentally touched; she pulled hers away, and the bowl fell and was broken.

§ 13.

The next day Naomi left for Rye, where she stayed three weeks. She was mistaken, however, in thinking she had found a place of refuge, the hunt still went on. Reuben knew that his kiss had given him a definite position with regard to her, and Naomi knew that he knew. Twice he came over and visited her at Rye. He never attempted to kiss her again, and carefully avoided all talk of love. Indeed, her father was generally in the room. He was much taken with young Backfield, who was ready to talk shipping and harbour-work with him for hours.

"He's a solider man than ever poor Harry was," said old Gasson to Naomi, "more dependable, I should think. Reckon he'll do well for himself at Odiam. She'll be a lucky girl whom he marries."

Naomi had no mother.

Reuben was pleased with the impression he had made. He was now working definitely. At first he had merely drifted, drawn by the charm of the female creature, so delicate, soft and weak. Then common-sense had taken the rudder—he had seen Naomi's desirableness from a practical point of view; she was young, good-looking, sound if scarcely robust, well dowered, and of good family—fit in every way to be the mother of his children. Since Harry was debarred from marrying her, his brother could even more profitably take his place. Her money would then go direct to his ambition; he realised the enormous advantage of a little reserve capital and longed for a relaxation of financial strain. The Gassons were an old and respected family, and an alliance with them would give lustre to Odiam. Also he wanted children. He was fond of Naomi for her own sake. Poor little chicken! Her weakness appealed to him, and he rather enjoyed seeing her fluttering before his feet.

Towards the middle of April she came back to the farm to help Mrs. Backfield with her house-cleaning. She clung to the older woman all day, but she knew that Reuben would at last find her alone.

He did. She was laying the supper while Mrs. Backfield finished mending a curtain upstairs, when he marched suddenly into the room. He had come in from the yard, and his clothes smelt of the cow-stalls and of the manure that he loved. His face was moist; he stood in front of her and mopped his brow.

"I'm hungry, Naomi. Wot have you got fur me?"

"There's eggs . . ."

"Wot else?"

"Bread . . . cheese . . ."

She could scarcely frame the homely words. For some unaccountable reason she felt afraid, felt like some poor creature in a trap.

" Wot else ? "

" That's all."

" All ! But I'm still hungry. Wot more do you think I want ? "

She licked her lips.

He leaned over the table towards her.

" Wot more have you got fur me ? "

" Nothing, I—I'm going upstairs. Let me pass, please."

" Maybe I want a kiss."

" Oh, no, no ! " she cried, trying to edge between him and the wall.

" Why not ? "

He put his hands on her shoulders, she felt the warmth and heaviness of them, and was more frightened than ever because she liked it.

" Maybe I want more than a kiss."

She was leaning against the wall, if he had released her she could not have run away. She was like a rabbit, paralysed with fear.

He bent towards her and his lips closed on hers. She nearly fainted, but she did not struggle or try to scream. It seemed years that they stood linked by that unwilling kiss. At last he raised his head.

" Will you marry me, Naomi ? "

" No—— Oh, no ! "

" Why ? "

" No—no—I can't—I won't ! "

Strength came to her suddenly ; it was like awaking from a nightmare. She thrust him from her, slipped past, and ran out of the room.

The next morning she returned to Rye. But she could not stay there. Her heart was all restlessness and dissatisfaction. Soon Mrs. Backfield announced that she was coming back.

" I reckoned she would," said Reuben.

She arrived in the swale. A tender grey mist was in the air, smeething Boarzell, mingling with the smoke of Odiam chimneys, that curled out wood-scented into the dark. As Naomi climbed from the carrier's cart which had brought her, she smelled the daffodils each side of the garden path. The evening was full of pale perfumes, of ghostly yellows, massing faintly amidst the grey.

Reuben stood in the doorway and watched her come up the path, herself dim and ghostly, like the twilight and the flowers. When she was close he held out his arms to her, and she fell on his breast.

§ 14.

From thenceforward there was no looking back. Preparations for the wedding began at once. Old Gasson was delighted, and dowered his girl generously. As for Naomi, she gave herself up to the joys of bride-elect. Her position as Reuben's betrothed was much more important than as Harry's. It was more definite, more exalted, the ultimate marriage loomed more largely and more closely in it. She and Reuben were not so much sweethearts as husband and wife to be. Their present semi-attached state scarcely counted, it was just an unavoidable interval of preparation for a more definite relationship.

She was glad in a way that everything was so different, glad that Reuben's love-making was so utterly unlike Harry's. Otherwise she could never have plunged herself so deep into forgetfulness. She was quite without regrets—she could never have imagined she could be so free of them. She lived for the present, and for the future which was not her own. She was at rest. No longer the pursuing feet came after her, making her life a nightmare of long flights—she was safe in her captor's grasp, borne homeward on his shoulder.

She was not exaltedly happy or wildly expectant. Her anticipations were mostly material, buyings and stitchings. She looked forward to her position as mistress of Odiam, and stocked her linen cupboard. As for Reuben, her attitude towards him had changed at once with surrender. If he no longer terrified, also he no longer thrilled. She had grown fond of him, peacefully and domestically so, in a way she could never have been fond of Harry. She loved to feel his strong arm round her, his shoulder under her head, she loved to nestle close up to him and feel his warmth. His kisses were very different from Harry's, more lingering, more passionate, but, paradoxically, they thrilled her less. There had always been a touch of the wild and elfin in Harry's love-making which suggested an adventure in fairyland, whereas Reuben's suggested nothing but earth, and the earth is not exciting to those who have been in faery.

At last the wedding-day came—an afternoon in May, gloriously white and blue. Naomi stood before her mirror with delicious qualms, while one or two girl friends took the place of her mother and helped her to dress. She wore white silk, very full in the skirt, with a bunch of lilies of the valley in the folds of the bodice, which was cut low, showing the soft neck that in contrast to the dead white of the silk had taken a delicious creamy cowslip tint. Her lovable white hat was trimmed with artificial lilies of the valley, and she had white kid gloves and tiny white kid shoes.

She was very happy, and if she thought of Harry and what might have been, it only brought a delightful sad-smiling melancholy over her happiness like a bridal veil.

"How do I look?" she asked her friends.

"You look charming!"—"how well your hat becomes you!"—"how small your feet seem in your new shoes!"—"how sweet you smell!"—chorused

the girls, loving her more than ever because they envied her, after the manner of girls.

Naomi walked to church on her father's arm. She held her head down, and her bridesmaids saw her neck grow pink below the golden fluff on the nape. She hid her face from Reuben and would not look at him as they stood side by side before Rye altar. No one could hear her responses, they were spoken so faintly; she was the typical Victorian bride, all shy, trembling, and blushing.

Only once she dared look up, and that was when they were walking solemnly from the communion table to the vestry—then she suddenly looked up and saw Reuben's great strong shoulder towering above her own, his face rather flushed under its sunburn, and his hair unusually sleek and shining with some oil.

They did not speak to each other till he had her in his gig, driving up Playden Hill. Then he muttered—"Liddle Naomi—my wife," and kissed her on the neck and lips. She did not want him to kiss her, because she wished to avoid crumpling her gown, and also she was afraid Reuben's horse might choose that moment to kick or run away. But of course such reasons did not appeal to him, and it was a dishevelled and rather cross little bride whom he lifted out at Odiam.

The wedding supper was to be held at the bridegroom's house, as old Gasson's rooms were not large enough, and he objected to "having the place messed up." During the marriage service Mrs. Backfield had been worrying about her pie-crusts—indeed she almost wished she had stayed at home. Naomi helped her dish up the supper, while Reuben received the guests who were beginning to arrive, some from Rye, some from the neighbouring farms. There had been a certain amount of disgusted comment when it became known that Backfield was marrying his brother's sweetheart; but criticism of

Reuben always ended in reluctant admiration for his smartness as a business man.

"He'll go far, that young feller," said Realf of Grandturzel.

"Where's Harry?" Vennal asked.

"Sh-sh—döan't you go asking ork'ard questions."

"They wöan't have him to fiddle, I reckon," said Realf.

"I shud say even young Ben wudn't do that."

"Why not?" put in Ditch—"he döan't know naun about it. He's forgotten she ever wur his girl."

"You can't be sure o' that, Mus' Ditch—only the Lard knows wot mad folkses remember and wot they forget. But there's the supper ready; git moving or we'll have to sit by the door."

Odiam's strict rule had been relaxed in honour of the wedding, and a lavish, not to say luxurious, meal covered two long tables laid end to end across the kitchen. There was beef and mutton, there was stew, there were apple and gooseberry pies, and a few cone-shaped puddings, pink and white and brown, giving an aristocratic finish to the supper.

Naomi and Reuben sat at the head of the table, Mr. Gasson and Mrs. Backfield on either side of them. Harry was not present, for his methods of feeding made him rather a disgusting object at meals. Naomi had put herself tidy, but somehow she still felt disordered and flustered. She hated all this materialism encroaching on her romance. The sight of the farmers pushing for places at the table filled her with disgust—the slightest things upset her, the untidy appearance of the dishes after they had been helped, some beer stains on the cloth, even her husband's hearty appetite and not quite noiseless eating. The room soon became insufferably hot, and she felt herself getting damp and sticky—a most unlovely condition for a bride.

When the actual feeding was over there were speeches

and toasts. Vennal of Burntbarns proposed the health of the bride, and Realf of Grandturzel that of the groom. Then Mrs. Backfield's health was drunk, then Mr. Gasson's. There were more toasts, and some songs—"Oh, no, I never mention her," "The Sussex Whistling Song," and old farmhouse ballads, such as:

"Our maid she would a hunting go,
She'd never a horse to ride;
She mounted on her master's boar,
And spurred him on the side.
Chink! chink! chink! the bridle went,
As she rode o'er the downs.
So here's unto our maiden's health,
Drink round, my boys! drink round!"

Naomi felt bored and sick; twice she yawned, and she stretched her tired shoulders under her dress. At last Reuben noticed her discomfort.

"You're tired—you'd better go to bed," he whispered, and she at once gladly rose and slipped away, though she would not have gone without his suggestion.

"Can I help you, dear?" asked Mrs. Backfield as she passed her chair. But Naomi wanted to be alone.

She stole out of the kitchen into the peace of the dark house, ran up the stairs, and found the right door in the unlighted passage. The bedroom was very big and cold, and on the threshold she wrinkled up her nose at a strange scent, something like hay and dry flowers.

She groped her way to the chimney-piece and found a candle and a tinder-box. The next minute a tiny throbbing flame fought unsuccessfully with the darkness which still massed in the corners and among the cumbrous bits of furniture. Naomi's new kid shoes were hurting her, and she bent down to untie them; but even as she bent, her eyes were growing used to the dim light, and she noticed something queer about the room. She lifted her head and saw that the outlines of the

dressing-table and bed were rough . . . the scent of dry grass suddenly revolted her.

She looked round, and this time she saw clearly. About the mirror, along the bed-head, and garlanding the posts, were crude twists and lumps of field flowers —dandelions buttercups, moon daisies, oxlips, fennel, and cow-parsley, all bunched up with hay grass, all dry, withered, rotting, and malodorous. There was a great sheaf of them on her pillow, an armful torn up from a hay-field, still smelling of the sun that had blasted it. . . .

In a flash Naomi knew who had put them there. No sane mind could have conceived such a decoration or seeing eyes directed it. Harry, exiled from church and feast, had spent his time in a crazy effort to honour the happy pair. He knew she was to marry Reuben, but had not seemed to take much interest. Doubtless the general atmosphere of festivity and adornment had urged him to this.

How dreadful! Already she saw an insect crawling over the bed—probably there were lots of others about the room; and these flowers, all parched, dead, and evil-smelling, gave a sinister touch to her wedding day. A lump rose in her throat, the back of her eyes was seared by something hot and sudden. . . . Oh, Harry . . . Harry . . .

Then misery turned to rage. It was Reuben who had brought her to this, who had stolen her from Harry, forced her into marrying him, and exposed her to this anguish. She hated Reuben. She hated him. With all the fierceness of her conquered soul and yielded body she hated him. She would have nothing more to do with him, she would be revenged on him, punish him . . . a little hoarse scream of rage burst from her lips, and she turned suddenly and ran out of that dreadful room.

She ran down the passage, panting and sobbing with rage. Then at the stair head something even blacker

than the darkness met her. It seized her, it swung her up, she was powerless as a little bird in its grasp. Her struggles were crushed in the kind strong arms that held her, and rage was stifled from her lips with kisses.

BOOK II

THE WOMAN'S PART

§ 1.

AN elegy of oats.

Reuben's oats were a dismal failure. All the warm thrilling hopes which he had put into the ground with the seed and the rape cake, all the watching and expectation which had imparted as many delights as Naomi to the first weeks of his married life—all had ended in a few rows of scraggy, scabrous murrainous little shoots, most of which wilted as if with shame directly they appeared above the ground, while the others, after showing him and a derisive neighbourhood all that oats could do in the way of tulip-roots, sedge-leaves, and dropsical husk, shed their seeds in the first summer gale, and started July as stubble.

There was no denying it. Boarzell had beaten Reuben in this their first battle. That coarse, shaggy, unfruitful land had refused to submit to husbandry. Backfield had not yet taken Leviathan as his servant. His defeat stimulated local wit.

"How's the peas gitting on, Mäaster?" Ditch of Totease would facetiously enquire. "I rode by that new land of yours yesterday, and, says I, there's as fine a crop of creeping plants as ever I did see."

"'Täun't peas, thick 'un," Vennal would break in uproariously, "it's turnips—each of 'em got a root like my fist."

"And here wur I all this time guessing as it wur

cabbages acause of the leaves," old Ginner would finish, not to be outdone in badinage.

Reuben always accepted such chaff good-humouredly, for he knew it was prompted by envy, and he would have scorned to let these men know how much he had been hurt. Also, though defeated, he was quite undaunted. He was not going to be beaten. That untractable slope of marl should be sown as permanent pasture in the spring, and he would grow oats on the new piece he would buy at the end of the year with his wife's fortune.

Naomi's money had been the greatest possible help. He had roofed the Dutch barn, and retarred the oasts, he had bought a fine new plough horse and a waggon, and he was going to buy another piece of Boarzell—ten or twelve acres this time, of the more fruitful clay-soil by the Glotten brook. Naomi was pleased to see all the new things. The barn looked so spick-and-span with its scarlet tiles, and the oasts shone like polished ebony; she loved to stroke the horse's brown, snuffling nose, and " Oh, what a lovely blue ! " she said when she saw the waggon.

She could not take much interest in Reuben's ambitions, indeed she only partly understood them. What did he want Boarzell for ?—it was so rough and dreary, she was sure nothing would grow there. She loved the farm, with the dear faces of the cows, and the horses, and the poultry, and even the pigs, but talk of crops and acres only bored her. Sometimes Reuben's enthusiasm would spill over, and sitting by the fire with her in the evening, he would enlarge on all he was going to do with Boarzell—this year, next year, ten years hence. Then she would nestle close to him, and murmur—" Yes, dear " . . . " yes, dear " . . . " that will be glorious "—while all the time she was thinking of his long lashes, his strong brown neck, the dear weight of his arm on her shoulder, and the kiss that would be hers when he took his pipe out of his mouth.

From this it may be gathered that the sorrow and hate of Naomi's wedding night had been but the reaction of a moment. Indeed she woke the next morning to find herself a very happy wife. She fell back into her old attitude towards Reuben—affection, trust, and compliance, with which was mixed this time a little innocent passion. She loved being with him, was scrupulously anxious to please him, and would have worked her hands to pieces for his sake.

But Reuben did not want her to work. She was rather surprised at this at first, for she had expected that she would go on helping Mrs. Backfield as she had done before her marriage. Reuben, however, was quite firm—his wife was not to redden her skin by stooping over fires, or coarsen her hands by dabbling them in soapsuds. An occasional visit to the dairy or some half-playful help on bread-baking days was all he would allow.

" But won't it be too hard for mother ? " Naomi had objected.

" Mother ?—she's used to it, and she's tougher than you, liddle creature."

" But I could help just a bit."

" No, no—I wöan't have you go wearing yourself out. Döan't let's hear no more about it."

Naomi had submitted, as she always submitted, and after a while obedience was made easy. In August she realised that she was going to have a child and any conscientious desires which might have twinged her at the sight of Mrs. Backfield's seaming face and bending shoulders, were lost in the preoccupations of her own condition.

At first she had not been pleased. She was only nineteen, not particularly robust, and resented the loss of her health and freedom ; but after a while sweet thoughts and expectations began to warm in her. She loved little babies, and it would be delicious to have

one of her own. She hoped it would be a girl, and thought of beautiful names for it—Victoria, Emilia, Marianna, and others that she had seen in the Keepsake. But her delight was nothing to Reuben's. She had been surprised, overwhelmed by his joy when she told him her news. He, usually so reserved, had become transported, emotional, almost lyrical—so masterful, had humbled himself before her and had knelt at her feet with his face hidden in her gown.

She could never guess what that child meant to Reuben. It meant a fellow labourer on his farm, a fellow fighter on Boarzell, and after he was dead a Man to carry on his work and his battle. At last he would have someone to share his ambition—that child should be trained up in the atmosphere of enterprise ; as other fathers taught their children to love and serve God, so Reuben would teach this son to love and serve Odiam. He would no longer strive alone, he would have a comrade, a soldier with him. And after this boy there would be other boys, all growing up in the love of Odiam, to live for it.

He treated his wife like a queen, he would not allow her the smallest exertion. He waited on her hand and foot and expected his mother to do the same. Every evening, or, later in the year, in the afternoon, he would come home early from his work, and take her out for a walk on his arm. He would not allow her to go alone, for fear that she might overtire herself or that anything might frighten her. He insisted on her having the daintiest food, and never eating less than a certain quantity every day ; he decided that the Odiam chairs were too hard, and bought her cushions at Rye. In fact he pampered her as much as he denied everybody else and himself.

Naomi soon came to enjoy her coddling, even though occasionally his solicitude was inclined to be tiresome. As time wore on he would not let her walk up and down

stairs, but carried her up to bed himself, and down again in the morning. She grew fat, white, and languorous. She would lie for hours with her hands folded on her lap, now and then picking up a bit of sewing for a few minutes, then dropping it again. She was proud of her position in comparison with other farmers' wives in the same circumstances. Their men kept them working up to the last week.

During this time she saw very little of Harry and scarcely ever thought of him. She no longer had any doubts as to his being quite mad.

§ 2.

In the autumn Reuben bought ten more acres of Boarzell—a better piece of land than the first, more sheltered, with more clay in the soil. Hops would do well on the lower part of it down by the brook.

He also bought three Jersey cows; they would improve the small dairy business he had established, and their milk would be good for Naomi. His watchfulness of his wife had now almost become tyranny. He scolded her if she stooped to pick up her scissors, and would not let her walk even in the garden without him.

Naomi submitted languidly. Her days passed in a comfortable heaviness, and though she occasionally felt bored, on the whole she enjoyed being fussed over and waited on. During those months her relations with Reuben's mother became subtly changed. Before her marriage there had been a certain friendship and equality between them, but now the elder woman took more the place of a servant. It was not because she waited on Naomi, fetched and carried—Reuben did that, and was her master still. It was rather something in her whole attitude. She had ceased to confide in Naomi, ceased perhaps to care for her very much, and this gave a certain menial touch to her services. It would be hard

to say what had separated the two women—perhaps it was because one toiled all day while the other lay idle, perhaps it was a twinge of maternal jealousy on Mrs. Backfield's part, for Reuben was beginning to notice her less and less. After a time Naomi realised this estrangement, and though at first she did not care, later on it came to distress her. Somehow she did not like the idea of being without a woman associate—in spite of her love for Reuben, now more passive and more languid, like every other emotion, she craved instinctively for someone of her own sex in whom she could confide and on whom she could rely.

The year dipped into winter, then rose again into spring. Lambs began to bleat in the pens, and with the last of them in March came Naomi's baby.

Reuben was nearly mad with anxiety. His mother's calm, the doctor's leisureliness, the midwife's bustling common sense, struck him as callous and unnatural. Even Naomi greeted him with a wan, peaceful smile, when frantic with waiting, he stole up to her room. Did they all realise, he wondered, what was at stake? Suppose anything should happen. . . . In vain the doctor assured him that everything was normal and going on just as it should.

He went out and did a little work, but after an hour or so flung down the chicken-coop he was making, and rushed into the house. His usual question received its usual answer. He thought the doctor a hemmed fraud and the doctor thought him a damned fool.

The sun set, and Reuben had given up even the attempt to work. He wandered on Boarzell till the outline of its crest was lost in the black pit of night. Then a new anxiety began to fret him. Possibly all was going well since everybody said so, but—suppose the child was a girl! Up till now he had scarcely thought of such a thing, he had made sure that his child would be a boy, someone to help him in his struggle and to

reap the fruits of it after he was gone. But, suppose, after all, it should be a girl! Quite probably it would be —why should he think it would not? The sweat stood on Reuben's forehead.

Then suddenly he saw something white moving in the darkness. It was coming towards him. It was his mother's apron.

He ran to meet her, for his legs tottered so that he could not walk. He could not frame his question, but she answered it:

"All's well . . . it's a boy."

§ 3.

Naomi spent a peaceful and happy convalescence. Everything combined for her blessedness. The soft April days scattered their scent and sunshine on her bed, where she lay with her baby, full of drowsy hopes. Even Boarzell's firs had a mellowness about them, as if her motherhood had sweetened not only herself and those about her, but the grim face of nature militant.

Her memories of those days were full of the smell of daffodils blown in at her window from the garden and of primroses set by Reuben in a bowl beside the bed—of Reuben stooping over her, smoothing back her hair, and stroking her face with hands that quivered strangely, or holding the baby as if it were made of fire and glass.

As soon as she was well enough the christening took place in Peasmarsh church. The heir of all the Backfields was important enough to receive three Christian names—Reuben after his father, Thomas after old Gasson, and Albert after the Prince Consort. "I shall call him Albert," said Naomi.

That spring and summer Reuben worked with a light heart. His fatherhood made him proud and expansive. He would boast about the baby to Beatup, tell him how many ounces it had gained in the week, enlarge on its

strength and energy, with intimate details concerning its digestion—all of which were received open-mouthed by Beatup who knew pretty well as much about babies as he did about œcumenical councils.

"He'll soon be able to do a bit of work wud us, Beatup," said Reuben apocalyptically.—"I'll have him on when he's ten or thereabouts, and at fifteen he'll be doing full man's work. I shouldn't wonder as how I'd never want another hand but you—we could manage the pläace, I reckon, till the lad's old enough, and then there'll be others. . . ."

"Yus, Mäaster," said Beatup.

The second piece of land had thriven better than the first. The hops were sturdy and promising beside the brook, and on the higher grounds the new pastures fattened. Reuben had decided to dig up a couple of his old grass meadows and prepare them for grain-sowing in the autumn. The soil was good, and it was only his father's want of enterprise which had kept so much of Odiam as mere grazing land. As for the cows, there was ample provision for them on the new pastures, which Boarzell would continue to yield, even if it refused oats—"But I'll have oats there some day, I reckon," said Reuben, "oats, and barley, and maybe wheat."

He pictured Odiam chiefly as a great grain farm—though there might be more money in fruit or milk, these would be mere temporary profit-making concerns, means to an end; for glory and real permanent fortune lay in wheat. He was terribly anxious lest the Corn Laws should be repealed, a catastrophe which had threatened farming for several years. For the first time he began to take an interest in politics and follow the trend of public opinion. He could not read, so was forced to depend on Naomi to read him the newspaper he occasionally had three days old from Rye.

The Backfields had always been Tory, just as they had always been Church, because Liberalism and Dissent

were "low," and unworthy of yeomen farmers. But they had never felt very keenly about politics, which, except at election times, had not come much into their lives. Even at the elections the interest had been slight, because up till ten years ago Rye had been a pocket borough, and its Radical member went up to Parliament without any of the pamphlet-writing, bill-sticking, mud-throwing, or free-fighting, which stirred the blood in other towns.

Now, however, having vital interests at stake, Reuben became an absorbed and truculent Conservative. He never called in at the Cocks without haranguing the company on the benefits of the wheat-tax, and cursing Cobden and Bright. On the occasion of the '42 election, he abandoned important obstetric duties in the cow-stable to Beatup, and rode into Rye to record his vote for the unsuccessful Tory candidate. The neighbourhood was of Whig tendencies, spoon-fed from the Manor, but the Backfields had never submitted to Bardon politics; and now even the fact that the Squire held Reuben's land of promise, failed to influence him.

The Bardons were strongly anti-Corn Law, but their opposition had that same touch of inefficiency which characterised all their dealings and earned Reuben's contempt. In spite of their Liberalism they had been driven for financial considerations to inclose Boarzell—then even the inclosure had failed, and they were now, also against their will, surrendering the land piecemeal to a man who was in every way their opposite and antagonist. They agitated feebly for Repeal, but were unable to make themselves heard. They visited the poor, and doled out relief in ineffectual scraps. Reuben despised them. They were an old line—effete—played out. He and his race would show them what was a Man.

§ 4.

That summer Naomi realised that she was going to have another child. She was sorry, for her maternal instincts were satisfied for the present, and she had begun to value her new-returned health. It would be hard to have to go back to bondage again.

However, there was no help for it. Reuben was overjoyed, and once more she slipped under his tyranny. This time she found it irksome, his watchfulness was a nuisance, his anxiety was absurd. However, she did not complain. She was too timid, and too fond of him.

"I hope it'll be a girl this time," she said one afternoon, when according to custom she was walking along Totease Lane, his arm under hers.

"A girl—— Oh, no! I want another boy."

"But we've got a boy, Reuben. It would be nice to have a girl now."

"Why, liddle creature?"

"Oh, I justabout love baby girls. They're so sweet—and all their dresses and that . . . Besides we don't want two boys."

To her surprise Reuben stopped in the road, and burst out laughing.

"Two boys!—not want two boys!—Why, we want ten boys! if I cud have twenty, I shudn't grumble."

"What nonsense you're talking, Backfield," said Naomi primly.

"I äun't talking nonsense, I'm talking sound sense. How am I to run the farm wudout boys? I want boys to help me work all that land. I'm going to have the whole of Boarzell, as I've told you a dunnamany times, and I'll want men wud me on it. So döan't you go talking o' girls. Wot use are girls?—none! They just spannel about, and then go off and get married."

"But a girl 'ud be useful in the house—she could help mother when she's older."

"No, thankee. However hard she works she äun't worth half a boy. You give me ten boys, missus, and then I döan't mind you having a girl or so to please yourself."

Naomi was disgusted. Reuben had once or twice offended her by his coarseness, but she could never get used to it.

"Oh, how can you speak to me so!" she gulped.

"Now, you silly liddle thing, wot are you crying for? Mayn't I have a joke?"

"But you're so vulgar!"

Reuben looked a little blank. None of the details of his great desire had hitherto struck him as vulgar.

"Vulgar, am I?" he said ruefully. "No matter, child, we wöan't go quarrelling. Come, dry your dear eyes, and maybe to-morrow I'll drive you over to Rye to see the market."

Naomi obediently dried her eyes, but it was rather hard to keep them from getting wet again. For in her heart she knew that it was not the vulgarity of Reuben's joke which had upset her, but a certain horrible convincingness about it. It was not so merely a joke as he would have her think.

During the days that followed her attitude towards him changed subtly, almost subconsciously. A strange fear of him came over her. Would he insist on her bearing child after child to help him realise his great ambition? It was ridiculous, she knew, and probably due to her state of health, but sometimes she found herself thinking of him not so much as a man as a thing; she saw in him no longer the loving if tyrannical husband, but a law, a force, to which she and everyone else must bow. She even noticed a kind of likeness between him and Boarzell—swart, strong, cruel, full of an irrepressible life.

§ 5.

The following spring Naomi gave birth to twin boys. With these twins really started the epic of her maternity. She was not to be one of those women for whom motherhood is a little song of baby shoes and blue sashes, and games and kisses and rockings to sleep. Hers was altogether a sterner business, her part in a battle—it was motherhood for a definite purpose, man and woman taking a leaf out of nature's book, playing her game to their own advantage, using her methods only to crush her at last. In a word it was epic—and the one drawback was that Naomi had never been meant for an epic part in life. She of all women had been meant for baby shoes and blue sashes, and here she was with her shoulder against Reuben's, helping him in the battle which even he found hard. . . .

However, as yet there were few misgivings. That faintness of spirit which had come over her during the last few months of her pregnancy, faded like a ghost in the first joyous days of her deliverance. Reuben's pride, delight, and humble gratitude were enough to make any woman happy, even without those two dear fat little babies which the doctor said were the finest twins he had ever seen. Naomi was one of those women who, even without very strong maternal instincts, cannot resist a baby. The soft limbs, the big downy heads, the groping wet mouths of her boys were a sheer physical delight to her. She even forgot to regret that one of them was not a girl.

She made a quick recovery, and Robert and Peter were christened at Easter-time. Naomi looked every inch the proud mother. Her slight figure had acquired more matronly lines, and she even affected a more elderly style of dress. For some time afterwards, proud and beloved, she really felt that motherhood was her vocation, and when in the course of the summer she

realised that her experiences were to be repeated, she was not so sorry as she had been before. She hoped desperately it would be a girl—but this time said nothing to Reuben.

Once more her attitude towards him had changed. She no longer felt the timid passion of the first months after her marriage, but she also no longer felt that sinister dread and foreboding which had succeeded it. She looked upon him less as her husband, inspiring alternately love and terror, than as the father of her children. She saw him, so to speak, through them. She loved him because they were his as well as hers. She spoke less of " I " and " he," and more of " us," " we," and " ours."

All the same she was bitterly disappointed when the following year another boy was born. She sobbed into her pillow, and even Reuben's delight and little Richard's soft kicks against her breast, could not comfort her. In fact she felt secretly angry with Reuben for his joy. He did not think of her and what she wanted. He thought only of his dirty old farm, and that dreary, horrible Boarzell.

As time wore on, and her hopes were once more roused, she became quite obsessed by the idea of having a girl. She thought of nothing but the little frocks, the ribbons with which she would tie the pretty hair. She pictured the times she and her daughter would have together, the confidences they would exchange—for old Mrs. Backfield grew more and more silent and unreceptive, and her neighbours were not of her mould. They would tell each other everything . . . she had dreams of an impossible little pink-and-white girl like a doll, with golden curls and blue eyes and a white muslin frock. In her dreams she would stretch out her arms to this ached-for child, and would wake sobbing, with the tears running down her face.

Then, at last, after experiences which had had bore-

dom added to their pain by repetition, she murmured—"What is it, mother?"—and a real, breathing, living, crying, little girl was put into her arms.

§ 6.

The positions of husband and wife were now reversed. It was Reuben who sulked and gloomed, looking at the baby askance, while Naomi moved in a daydream of peace and rapture and desire satisfied. She was too happy to care much about her husband's disappointment. She would never have believed it if anyone had told her in the first weeks of her marriage that she could have a joy and not mind if he did not share it, a child and not fret if he did not love it. But now her child sufficed her, or rather she had learned the lesson of wives, to suffice herself, and could love and rejoice without a comrade.

She had forgotten the Arabellas and Mariannas of the Keepsake, and the baby was called Fanny after Naomi's own mother, whom she dimly remembered. Fanny became the centre of Naomi's life; she was not as healthy as the other children, and her little pains and illnesses were all so many cords drawing her closer to her mother's heart. Though she required twice as much attention as the boys, Naomi never fretted or grew weary, as she had sometimes done in the service of the other little ones—on the contrary, she bloomed into a new beauty, and recovered the youthfulness she had begun to lose.

Strange to say, Harry, who had paid little attention to the earlier babies, seemed drawn to this one. He would hang round Naomi when she had her in her lap, and sometimes gingerly put out a hand and stroke the child's limbs. Naomi could not bear that he should touch her; but he amused Fanny, so she tolerated him. He had fallen into the habit of many half-witted

people and occasionally made strange faces, which though repulsive to everyone else, filled Fanny with hilarious delight. Indeed they were the first thing she "noticed."

"Oh, the pretty baby! save the pretty baby!"—Harry would mutter and shriek, and he would wander about the house crying—"Save the pretty baby!" till Naomi declared that he gave her the shivers.

"Keep him out of the way, can't you, Backfield?" she said to her husband.

In Reuben's eyes Naomi was just as irritating and ridiculous as Harry. She made foolish clothes for Fanny, quite unfit for a child in her position—muslins and ribbon bows, little knitted shoes, which she was forever pulling off to kiss the baby's feet. She would seat her on some high big chair in which she lolled with grotesque importance, and would kneel before her and call her "Miss Fanny."

"There, Miss Fanny—see what a grand baby you are. Soon all the boys will be courting you—see if they don't. You shall always wear silk and muslins and sit on cushions, and you will always love your mother, won't you, dear little miss?"

Reuben was revolted—also a little hurt. It seemed to him that Naomi was neglecting the boys he was so proud of. Albert was nearly four years old, a fine sturdy child, worth a dozen puling Fannys, and Robert and Pete were vigorous crawlers and adventurers, who ought to rejoice any mother's heart. Richard was still in an uninteresting stage—but, hem it all! he was a boy.

Nearly as bad as her indifference to the children she had already borne, was her indifference to the child she was about to bear. She was expecting her confinement in the spring, but she did not seem to take the slightest interest in it or the slightest care of herself. Again and again she would start up from the sofa where she had

lain down by his orders, because she heard Fanny crying upstairs. She risked injuring herself by continually carrying her about or by stooping over her as she rolled on the floor.

Reuben often spoke to her severely, but with no result. There was a time when he could never chide her without her crying, but now she hardly seemed to care.

As the autumn wore on Fanny became more and more ailing and Naomi more and more preoccupied. There were doctor's visits to be paid for, and on one or two occasions Naomi had sent for him unnecessarily. It maddened Reuben to think that he was not master of his own household, but though he could always enforce obedience in person, he was compelled continually to be out of doors, even sometimes away from the farm, and he could not control what went on in his absence.

Odiam was passing through anxious times. The expected and dreaded had happened—the Corn Laws had been repealed, and cursing farmers grubbed up their wheatfields, hoping no more from grain. Reuben was bitterly disappointed, the whole future of Odiam was bound up with grain, the most honourable and—in the long run—most profitable of a farm's concerns. In his dreams he had seen wind-rippled waves of wheat rolling up to Boarzell's very crest, he had seen the threshed corn filling his barn, or rumbling to Iden Mill. Now the cheap abundant foreign grain would fight his home-sown harvests. He would have to depend for revenue on milk and hops, and grow wheat only as an expensive decoration. Peel was a traitor; he had betrayed the staunch grain-growing Tories who had inconvenienced themselves with muddy rides to vote for his supporters. For a year or so Reuben hated the Conservatives, and would not vote at all at the next election.

He had trouble, too, with his new grass. One of his Jersey cows suddenly died, and it turned out that it

had eaten some poisonous plant which had insinuated itself into the pasture. It was as if Boarzell fought treacherously—with stabbings in the dark as well as blastings in the open. The night the Jersey died, Reuben sat with his head buried in his arms on the kitchen table, while Naomi carried her Miss Fanny about the room, and told her about the beautiful silk gowns she would wear when she grew up.

§ 7.

That autumn he had sown catch-crops of Italian rye grass, which gave the stock a good early winter feed. He had grown sharper in his dealings with the land, he knew how to take it at a disadvantage, snatch out a few roots. Every inch of the farm was now at work, for every blade of grass now counted. He had even dug up the garden, casting aside rose-bushes, sweet-peas, and dahlias for dull rows of drum-head cabbages, potatoes, kale, and beans. And manure . . . there was manure everywhere, lying under the very parlour windows, sending up its effluvium on the foggy winter air till it crept into even the close-shut bedroom, making Naomi conscious of Reuben in her dreams.

She was inclined to be sulky in those days. She disliked the smell of manure, she disliked being made to dream of Reuben, towards whom she now felt a vague hostility. What business had he to go and saddle her with another child? Surely she had enough—four boys and a girl. What business had he to make her languid and delicate just when she needed all her health for the ailing Fanny? He was so unsympathetic about Fanny, too, one really might think he did not care what the poor little creature suffered.

Naomi began to complain about him to the neighbours. She joined in those wifely discussions, wherein every woman plaintively abused her own man, and rose at once in fury if another woman ventured to do so.

" Backfield he scarcely takes any notice of me now—always thinking about his farm. Talks of nothing but hops and oats. Would you believe it, Mrs. Ditch, but he hardly ever looks at this dear little Fanny. He cares for his boys right enough, because when they're grown up they'll be able to work for him, but he just-about neglects his girlie—that's what he does, he neglects her. The other night, there she was crying and sobbing her little heart out, and he wouldn't let me send for the doctor. Says he can't afford to have the doctor here for nothing. Nothing, indeed ! . . ."

So Naomi would maunder to her acquaintance ; with Reuben she confined herself to hints and innuendoes. Sometimes she complained to Mrs. Backfield, but her husband's mother was unsympathetic.

" You döan't know when you're in luck," she said as she thumped the dough—" nothing to do but bath and dress the children, and yet you grumble. If you had to work like me——"

" I don't know why you do it. Make Backfield get a girl to help you."

" And pay eight shillings a month when he wants the money so badly ! No, if a woman can't work fur her son, I döan't see much good in her. Some women "—rather venomously—" even work fur their husbands."

" You know well enough he won't let me work for him."

" I never said as you ought to work fur him—all I said wur as you shouldn't ought to grumble."

A loud wail from Fanny in her cradle drove the retort from Naomi's lips. She sprang from the arm-chair where she had been resting, and ran heavily across the room to the baby's side.

" What's the matter, my darling ? Come to mother, little Miss Fanny. Oh, I know something's wrong with her, or she wouldn't cry so. She's got such a sweet temper really."

She picked the child out of the cradle, and began to walk up and down the room, rocking it in her arms. Fanny's wails grew louder, more long-drawn, and more plaintive.

Reuben came in, and his brows contracted when he saw what his wife was doing. There was a slight moisture on her forehead, and she strained the child violently to her breast.

"Come, Naomi, put her down. It's bad for you to carry her about like this."

"Oh, Reuben, I'm sure she's ill. Can't we send Beatup over for the doctor?"

"No, we can't. There's naun the matter wud her really. She's always crying."

Naomi faced him almost spitefully.

"If one of the boys had hurt his little finger you'd have doctor in at once. It's only because it's Fanny. You don't love her, you——"

"Now none o' that, missus," said Reuben roughly—"you put the child back in her cradle, and go and lie down yourself. I döan't want to have to fetch doctor in to *you*."

Naomi had not acquired the art of flouting him openly. She tearfully put Fanny into her cradle, and lay and sulked on the sofa for the rest of the evening.

That night she dreamed that her new baby was born, and that Reuben had taken away Fanny and given her to Beatup. Beatup was carrying her down to the pond to drown her as he drowned the kittens, and Naomi stood in the garden with immovable weights on every limb listening to the despairing shrieks of her little girl. They were dreadful shrieks, not like a baby's at all.

They still sounded when Naomi woke. She sat up in bed, uncertain as to whether she were dreaming or not. Then from Fanny's little bed beside the big one came something terrible—a low long wail like an animal's dying into a moan. It seemed as if her heart stopped

beating. She felt the sweat rush out all over her body. The next minute she was out of bed, groping for Fanny in the darkness.

She found her and lifted her in her arms ; once more that dreadful wailing moan came from the little body, mingling this time with a snore from Reuben. Naomi, still grasping Fanny, managed to light a candle. The child's face was deadly white and drawn in a strange way, while her lips were blue.

" Reuben ! " shrieked Naomi.

He did not wake. Worn out with hard work and his anxiety about his farm, he still slept heavily, rolled in the blanket. A sick insane rage seized Naomi. She sprang on the bed, tore the clothes off him, shook him, beat him, pulled his hair, while all the time she grasped the now silent Fanny convulsively between her left arm and her breast.

" My child's dying. Get up, you brute. Fetch the doctor. My child's dying ! "

For a moment Reuben was bewildered with his sudden waking, but he soon came to himself at the sight of his wife's distorted face and the inanimate lop-headed baby. He sprang up, pulled on his trousers, and in two minutes had bundled the half-conscious but utterly willing Beatup out of his attic, and sent him off on the fastest horse to Rye. Then he came back into the bedroom. Naomi was sitting on the floor, her hair falling over her shoulders, the baby unconscious on her lap.

" Give her to me, child—let me look."

" No, no—get away," and Naomi once more caught up Fanny to her breast.

" I'll go and fetch mother."

Mrs. Backfield arrived in a washed-out bed-gown. A fire was lit and water put on to boil. Fanny's, however, did not seem just an ordinary case of " fits " ; she lay limp in her mother's arms, strangely blue round the mouth, her eyes half open.

"Oh, what is it?—what is it?" wailed Naomi—"can't we do anything? Oh, why doesn't the doctor come?"

Suddenly the baby stiffened on her lap. The limbs became rigid, the face black. Then something rasped in its throat.

"Bring the water!—Bring the water!" screamed Naomi, hardly knowing what she said.

Mrs. Backfield poured the water into a basin, and Naomi lifted Miss Fanny to put her into the steaming bath.

"It's no use," said Reuben. He knew the child was dead.

But Naomi insisted on putting Fanny into the basin. She held her up in it for a moment. Then suddenly let her drop, and fell forward, wailing.

Reuben and Mrs. Backfield tried in vain to soothe her, and put her back to bed. She was like a mad woman. She who had always been so timid and gentle, peevish at the worst, now shouted, kicked and raved.

"You've killed her! it's your doing . . . you're a murderer!" she screamed at Reuben.

He lifted her bodily and laid her on the bed. But she was still half insane—

"I hate you! I hate you!" she cried, and threw herself about.

When the doctor arrived an hour later, his services were needed after all. For Naomi gave birth to a little boy at dawn.

§ 8.

Naomi had met her tragedy. In course of time she recovered from her confinement, but all the joy of life and motherhood had gone from her. It was inexplicable to Reuben that she could mourn so hopelessly over the death of a little weak girl, who would have been nothing but a care and an expense if she had lived. It was

inexplicable that she could take no interest in young Benjamin, a sound, well-made little fellow in spite of his premature birth. For the first time she was unable to suckle her baby, and Reuben was forced to engage a nurse, not liking the responsibility of bringing him up by hand.

But he was very good to Naomi. He tried to forget her indifference to his beloved boys, and to soothe and strengthen her into something like her old self. She did not repulse him. All the violence and the desperation in her had burnt themselves out during that night of frenzy. She lay in bed hour after hour without moving, her long hair—which was now beginning to come out in handfuls when she brushed it—spread over the pillow. Her muscles were slack, she lay without any suppleness, heavy against the mattress. After some weeks she was able to get up, and go about her duties with the children. She never spoke of her misery, she ate, she sewed, she even gossiped with the neighbours, as before. But something was gone from her—her eye sometimes had a vacant, roving look, her shoulders stooped, and her skin grew sallow.

She was still fond of her children, but in a listless, mechanical way. Sometimes when she had them all gathered round her, for their bedtime or a bath, she would find the tears welling up in her eyes till all the little faces were blurred. Poor mites! what future lay ahead of them? They were their father's slaves as well as she—the utmost would be ground out of them as it had been ground out of her.

Once more she had taken up her unwilling part in Boarzell's epic. She was expecting another child for the following spring. This would be her seventh.

She was no longer merely dissatisfied. In her heart she passionately rebelled. She hated herself, and her condition, for now she hated Reuben. The vague hostility she had felt towards him during Fanny's short

life had given place to a definite hatred. She looked upon Reuben as the murderer of her child, and she hated him. During the first days of her grief he had been so kind to her that she had grown dependent on him and hatred was delayed, but now dependence and dazed gratitude had passed away, and in their place was a sick, heavy loathing for the man whose neglect and indifference she believed had killed her child. She could not endure the thought of giving him another. Sometimes she thought she would like to kill herself, but she was too weak a soul for anything desperate.

In those days she could not bear the sound of Harry's fiddle, and he was told he must not play it in the house.

§ 9.

The Repeal of the Corn Laws did not have such a bad effect on Odiam as Reuben had feared. The harvests in '46 and '47 were unusually good, and a general revival of prosperity throughout the country atoned for the low price of grain. It was not to be expected, however, that he would forgive at once the party which had betrayed agricultural interests. He transferred his political allegiance to Disraeli, whose feudalistic attitude won his entire respect. It was a great trial to him that he could not read the newspapers, for nowadays he did not care to have Naomi read to him. She used to sometimes, but her utter lack of interest and understanding was no longer atoned for by a voice love-modulated or a soft hand stroking his. He resolved that none of his children should share his disabilities, and already the infant Albert toddled daily to a little house in the village where two vague-looking sisters taught the rising generation mysteries hidden from their parents. Reuben could spell out one or two words, and could write " Reuben Backfield " in big printing letters at the bottom of any document he had to sign, but he had no time to educate himself further.

He was now twenty-seven, looking in some ways strangely older, in others far younger, than his age. The boy in him had not had much chance of surviving adolescence. Life had come down too hard on him. A grim struggle does not nourish youth, and mentally Reuben was ten or twelve years ahead of twenty-seven. His splendid health and strength, however, had maintained a physical boyishness, expressing itself in zeal and high spirits, a keen appetite, a boundless capacity for work, an undaunted enterprise. He was always hungry, he fell asleep directly his head touched the pillow, and slept like a child beside the tossing and wakeful Naomi.

His work had made him splendid. His skin was the colour of the soil he tilled, a warm ruddy brown, his hair was black, growing low on the forehead, and curling slightly behind the ears. The moulding of his neck and jaw, his eyes, dark, bright, and not without laughter in them, his teeth, big, white, and pointed, like an animal's —all spoke of clean and vigorous manhood. He was now unmistakably a finer specimen than Harry. Harry had lost to a great measure his good looks. Not only had the vacancy of his face robbed it of much of its attraction—for more beautiful than shape or colouring or feature had been the free spirit that looked out of his eyes—but his constant habit of making hideous grimaces had worked it into lines, while the scar of his burning sometimes showed across his cheek. Add to this a stoop and a shambling gait, and it is no longer "Beautiful Harry," nor even the ghost of him, so much as some changeling, some ill-done counterfeit image, set up by vindictive nature in his stead.

Harry was no more his mother's favourite son. She was not the type of woman to whom a maimed child is dearer than half a dozen healthy ones. On the contrary he filled her with a vague terror and repulsion. She spoke to him gently, tended him carefully, even

sometimes forced herself to caress him—but for the most part she avoided him, feeling as she did so a vague shame and regret.

On the other hand, her devotion to Reuben grew more and more absorbing and submissive. Her type was obviously the tyrant-loving, the more primitive kind, which worships the strong of the tribe and recoils instinctively from the weak. Where many a woman, perhaps rougher and harder than she, would have flung all the love and sweetness of her nature upon the blasted Harry, she turned instead to the strong, stalwart Reuben, who tyrannised over her and treated her with less and less consideration . . . and this after twenty years of happy married life, during which she had idled and been waited on, and learned a hundred dainty ways.

She had no patience with Naomi's simmering rebellion; she scoffed at her complaints, and always took Reuben's part against her.

"As long as there's men and women in the world, the men 'ull be top and the women bottom."

"Why?" asked Naomi.

"Because it wur meant so. If we'd bin meant fur masters d'you think we'd have bin made so liddle and dentical like?"

"But we're a sight smarter than men."

"Yes—that makes up to us a bit, but it döan't do us any real good . . . only helps us git round a man sometimes when we can't git over him."

"Then it does us some good after all. A sad state we'd be in if the men always had their own way."

"You take it from me that it's much better when a man has his own way than when he hasn't. Then he's pleased wud you and makes life warm and easy for you. It's women as are always going against men wot are unhappy. Please men and they'll be good to you and you'll be happy, döan't please them and they'll be bad to you and you'll be miserable. But women who're for

ever grumbling, and making a fuss about doing wot they've got to do whether they like it or not, and are cross-grained wives, and unwilling mothers . . ." and so on, and so on.

Yet Mrs. Backfield did not, any more than Naomi, understand Reuben's great ambition.

§ 10.

That autumn Naomi entered on a time of black depression—an utter gloom and weariness of body and mind. It was no mere dull staggering under blows, merciful in its blindness and lack of acute feeling—it was a clear-eyed misery, in which every object was as distinct as it was dark, like one of those sudden clearings of a stormy landscape, when trees, hedges, meadows, loom under the frowning sky, outstanding and black in detail, more vivid than in sunshine.

She saw now what she was—her husband's victim, the tool of his enterprise. He had never really loved her. He had been attracted by her—her beauty, her gentleness, her breeding, had appealed to him. But that was not why he had married her. He had married her for her money, which he was now spending on his farm, and he had married her because he wanted children and she was the most suitable mother he could find. He had never really loved her.

And she had never really loved him. That was another of the things she saw clearly. She had married him because his strength and good looks, his ardent wooing, had turned her head, because she had been weak and he had been masterful. But she had never loved him.

She had been a fool, and now she was paying the price of folly, which is always so much heavier than the price of sin. Here she was at twenty-five, prematurely old, exhausted, sick of life, and utterly alone. There

was no one to turn to in her wretchedness. Her neighbours were incapable of giving her real help or sympathy, Mrs. Backfield invariably took Reuben's part and resented the slightest criticism of him, old Gasson was hard and selfish, and not particularly interested in his daughter.

She wished, with all the wormwood that lies in useless regrets, that she had never married. Then, paradoxically, she would not have been so utterly alone. She would have had at least the help of sweet memories undefiled. She could have taken refuge in them from her sorrow, built them perhaps at last into hope. Now she had to thrust them from her, for they were one and all soiled by her unfaithfulness.

For the first time she began definitely to reproach herself for her treatment of Harry. Though she could never have married him, she could at least have been faithful to him.

> " O why, because sickness hath wasted my body,
> Should you do me to death with your dark treacherie ?
> O why, because brothers and friends all have left me,
> Should you leave me too, O my faithless ladie ! "

Moreover, she still sometimes had a vague feeling that at the start Harry had not been quite so mad as people thought, that he might perhaps have recovered if she had made him understand that she was true to him, still hoping. No doubt that was all nonsense, but she could not quite smother the idea that she had betrayed Harry. Perhaps it was partly because even before his accident she had cast longing eyes at Reuben. Once again she called up memories of him cutting down willows on his new land, and she acknowledged miserably to herself that in that hour she had already been unfaithful to Harry in her heart, and that all that came afterwards was but the following up of that initial act of treachery. A strong arm, a broad back, a blue shirt in the January twilight . . . and Naomi had set out

on a road every step of which was now over rough stones and broken shards.

In February her child was born—another girl. But this time Reuben was not sorry, for he realised that his mother would not last for ever, and that he must have a girl to take her place. It might have been expected that a baby girl would comfort Naomi for the lost Fanny, but such was not the case. It seemed as if with Fanny she had lost all power of loving and of rising again. Once more she was unable to feed the child, and her convalescence was dragging and miserable. When at last she was able to go about, a permanent ill-health seemed to have settled on her, the kind that rides tired women, making their faces sallow, their hair scanty, filling their backs with strange pains. She grew fretful, too, and her temper was none of the best.

§ II.

That year Reuben bought ten more acres of Boarzell, and limed them for oats. He felt that now he had strength to return to his first battle, and wring a grain crop out of that grudging soil. The new piece of ground abutted the Odiam lands on the Flightshot side, and he could see it from his window. Before going to bed at night, he would lean out and feast his eyes on it as it lay there softly covered in the dark, or glimmering in the faint star-dazzle of spring. Sometimes it seemed almost as if a breath came from it, a fragrance of sleep, and he would sit there inhaling it till Naomi peevishly begged him to shut the window and come to bed. Then in the mornings, when he woke according to healthy habit at five, he would sit up, and even from the bed he could see his land, waiting for him in the cold whiteness of dawn, silently calling him out to the freshness of its many dews.

He still kept the farm modestly, for he was anxious to

be able to do without help except from Beatup. His young family were also an expense. For a few years more he must expect to have them rather heavily on his hands . . . then Albert and the twins would be able to do a little work, and gradually both the capacity and number of his labourers would increase, till at last perhaps he would be able to discharge Beatup, and Backfield alone fight Backfield's battle.

Meantime he was worried about Naomi. It says much for the ineffectiveness of her emotions that he had not till just then realised her hostility towards him. Now that he saw it, he put it down to her ill-health, and re-established the tyrannous watch over her which he had kept up in the old days. He was sorry for her, and knew now that he had made a mistake in marrying her. He should have chosen a sturdier, more ambitious mate. However, there was no help for it, he could not give up the battle because his fellow-fighter had no stomach for it. He was grieved for the loss of her beauty, and would make things as easy for her as possible, but he could not let her off altogether. She must do her share in the struggle which was so much greater than either of them. She had rested from child-bearing a year, but he still longed desperately for children, and she became a mother again at the end of '49.

The baby was a girl, and Reuben was bitterly disappointed. One girl was quite enough, and he badly wanted more boys. Besides, Naomi was very ill, and the doctor told him in private that she ought not to have any more children, at least for some time.

"She never was a strong woman, and these repeated confinements have quite worn her out. You have seven children, Mr. Backfield, and I think that ought to be enough for any man."

"But two of them are girls—it's boys I want, surelye!"

"Aren't five boys enough for you?"

"No—they äun't."

"Well, of course, if she has a thorough rest from all work and worry, and recovers her health in the meantime, I don't say that in three or four years . . . But she's not a strong subject, Mr. Backfield, and you'd do well to remember it."

§ 12.

Reuben was very kind to Naomi during her illness. He helped his mother to nurse her, and spent by her side all the time he could spare from the farm. He was too strong to vent on her personally the rage and disappointment with which circumstances had filled him. He pitied her fragility, he even pitied her for the antagonism which he saw she still felt towards him.

At nights he slept upstairs in one of the attics, which always smelt of apples, because it was next to the loft where the apples were stored. He was happy there, in spite of some dark hours when the deadlock of his married life kept him awake. He wondered if there was a woman in the world who could share his ambitions for Odiam. He expected not, for women were an ambitionless race. If Naomi had had a single spark of zeal for the great enterprise in which he and she were engaged, she would not now be lying exhausted by her share in it. He had honoured her by asking her to join him in this splendid undertaking, and all she had done had been to prove that she had no fight in her.

He could now gaze out on Boarzell uninterrupted. The sight of the great Moor made his blood tingle; his whole being thrilled to see it lying there, swart, unconquered, challenging. How long would it be, he wondered, before he had subdued it? Surely in all Sussex, in all England, there had never been such an undertaking as this . . . and when he was triumphant, had achieved his great ambition, won his heart's desire,

how proud, how glorious he would be among his children. . . .

The wind would carry him the scent of gorse, like peaches and apricots. There was something in that scent which both mocked and delighted him. It was an irony that the huge couchant beast of Boarzell should smell so sweet—surely the wind should have brought him a pungent ammoniacal smell like the smell of stables . . . or perhaps the smell of blood.

But, after all, this subtle gorse-fragrance had its suitableness, for though gorse may cast out the scent of soft fruit from its flowers, its stalks are wire and its roots iron, its leaves are so many barbs for those who would lay hands on its sweetness. It was like Boarzell itself, which was Reuben's delight and his dread, his beloved and his enemy.

The day would come when Boarzell would no longer drench the night with perfume, when the gorse would be torn out of its hide to make room for the scentless grain. Then Reuben would no longer lean out of his window and dream of it, for dreams, like the peach-scent of the gorse, would go when the corn came. But those days were not yet.

Naomi's illness dragged. Sometimes Reuben suspected her of malingering, she so obviously did not want to get well. He guessed her reasons, and took an opportunity to tell her of the doctor's verdict. The struggle was in abeyance—at least her share of it. Nature—which was really what he was fighting in Boarzell—had gained a temporary advantage, and his outposts had been forced to retire.

Naomi began now decidedly to improve. She put on flesh, and showed a faint interest in life. Towards the end of April she was able to come downstairs. She was obviously much better, and old Mrs. Backfield hinted that she was even better than she looked. Reuben watched over her anxiously, delighted to notice day by

day fresh signs of strength. She began to do little things for the children, she even seemed proud of them. They were splendid children, but it was the first time that she had realised it. She helped the scholastic elders with their sums and made frocks for the little girls. She even allowed baby Mathilda to wear Fanny's shoes.

The summer wore on. The sallow tints in Naomi's skin were exchanged for the buttery ones which used to be before her marriage. Her hair ceased to fall, her cheeks plumped out, her voice lost its weak shrillness. She made herself a muslin gown, and Reuben bought ribbons for it at Rye.

The husband and wife now lived quite independently. They no longer made even the pretence of walking on the same path. Naomi played with the children, did a little sewing and housework—exactly what she chose—and occasionally went over to Totease or Burntbarns for a chat with the neighbours. She once even spent a couple of nights at her father's, the first time since her marriage that she had slept away from Odiam.

As for Reuben, he worked as hard as ever, but never spoke of it to his wife. He seemed to enjoy her society at meals, and now and then would take her out for a stroll along the lanes, or sit with her in the evening by the kitchen fire. Once more he liked to have her read him the papers; and though she understood no more than she had ever done, her voice had ceased to be dull and fretful. Then at night he would go up to his attic and drink in the smell of gorse at the window, till he grew drowsy and shut himself in with the smell of apples.

After a time they began to notice a convergence in these independent ways. It seemed as if only by running apart had they learned at last to run together. A certain friendliness and comradery began to establish itself between them. Reuben began to talk to Naomi

about politics and agricultural doings, and gradually her character underwent a strange blossoming. She became far more adult in her opinions ; she took interest in matters outside her household and immediate surroundings. He never spoke to her of his plans for Boarzell, for that would have brought them back into the old antagonism and unrest ; but when she read the papers to him he would discuss them with her, occasionally interrupt her with comments, and otherwise show that he had to do with an intelligent being. She in her turn would enquire into the progress of the hops or the oats, ask him if his new insect-killer was successful, or whether Ditch had done well with his harvest, or how much Realf's had fetched at the corn-market.

Three months passed in this new way. Reuben would never have believed that Naomi could be a companion to him, especially after the last few hostile years. As for her, she looked young and pretty again ; delicious slim lines had come into her figure—no longer the slack curves and emaciation of recent months, or the matronly fullness of earlier times. Her health seemed completely restored.

Then came a day early in December, when they were walking home together through the mud of Totease Lane, their faces whipped into redness by the south-west wind. Naomi wore a russet cloak and hood, and her hair, on which a few rain-drops glistened, was teasing her eyes. She held Reuben's arm, for the ruts were treacherous, and he noticed the spring and freedom of her walk. A sudden turn of the lane brought them round due west, and between them and the sunset stood Boarzell, its club of firs knobbily outlined against the grape-red sky. It smote itself upon Reuben's eyes almost as a thing forgotten—there, half blotting out the sunset with its blackness. Unconsciously his arm with Naomi's hand on it contracted against his side, while the colour deepened on his cheek-bones.

"Naomi."

"What is it?"

"Boarzell."

She lifted her eyes to the shape between her and the sky, and as unconsciously he had flushed so unconsciously she shuddered.

"Well, what about it?" she asked in a voice that stuck a little.

"It's wunnerful . . ." he murmured, "all that great big dark Moor, wot's going to be mine."

She did not speak.

"Mine!" he repeated almost fiercely.

Then suddenly she began to plead:

"Can't you let it alone, Reuben?—we—we've been so happy these last months not worrying about it. Must we ever start again?"

Her voice came anxiously, timidly like a child's. He dropped her hand from his arm.

"Yes—we must," he said shortly.

They reached Odiam, both feeling that the glory of those last three months had departed. The sight of Boarzell, lying black and hullish across their path, had made them realise that their happiness was but an interval, an interlude between more significant, more sinister things. Naomi had lost her peace and confidence, she seemed to avoid her husband, was tongue-tied in his presence, gave him a hurried good night from the door. Reuben was silent and meditative—when his eyes rested on Naomi they were half regretful.

That night he lay awake long hours in the smell of apples. He pondered many things. Those past months had been sweet in their revived tenderness, their simple freedom. But Boarzell had reasserted itself—Naomi was now quite well again—she must no longer shirk her duties. She must have more children.

It was cruel, he knew. She had already given him seven, she could not realise that her task was not yet

done. She had just felt what it was to be well and strong again after long months of illness. It would be cruel to impose on her once more the pains and weariness of motherhood. It would be cruel.—But, hem it all! was not the thing he was fighting cruel? Was not Boarzell cruel, meeting his endeavours with every form of violence and treachery? If he was to conquer it he too must be cruel, must harden his heart, and press forward, without caring how much he or anyone bled on the way. He could not stop to consider even his nearest and dearest when his foe had neither mercy nor ruth for him.

§ 13.

It was the August of another year. Reuben's new land on Boarzell was tawny with oats. He had at last broken into that defiant earth and taken handfuls of its treasure. To-day he inspected his crop, and planned for its reaping. With parted lips and a faint sensuous gleam in his eyes he watched it bow and ripple before the little breeze that stole over the hedges from Tiffenden. He drank in the scent of the baking awns, the heat of the sun-cracked earth. It was all dear to him—all ecstasy. And he himself was dear to himself because the beauty of it fell upon him . . . his body, strong and tired, smelling a little of sweat, his back scorched by the heat in which he had bent, his hand strong as iron upon his sickle. Oh Lord! it was good to be a man, to feel the sap of life and conquest running in you, to be battling with mighty forces, to be able to fight seasons, elements, earth, and nature. . . .

He turned and walked slowly homewards, a smile on his lips. As he passed the orchard, where a crop of plums was ripening, the shrill whir of a bird-rattle made him look up. There in the long grass stood his young Albert, dutifully scaring sparrows from the trees. He had been there all the afternoon, and Reuben

beckoned to him to come in to tea. Further on, in the yard, he encountered Robert feeding the chickens out of an enormous bowl carried by Pete, whose arms with difficulty embraced its girth. He summoned these two in. His family trotted after him at a respectful distance. They did not speak, except to say " Oo " occasionally to each other.

In the kitchen a substantial meal was prepared. It was the children's supper, and was to last Reuben till he came in at nine o'clock and had a bowl of broth before going to bed. Old Mrs. Backfield was settling the children round the table. Caro and Tilly showed only their heads above the cloth, a piece of neck proclaimed Benjamin's extra inches, while Richard had quite two buttons to his credit. Harry sat at the bottom beside Caroline ; when he heard Albert's rattle, he seized it and began making a hideous din. Caro and Tilly began to cry, and Reuben snatched the rattle away.

He sat down, and immediately his mother put a plate of hot bacon before him. She was vexed because it was the only meat he allowed himself on week-days. The children ate bread and milk, and thrived on it, to judge by their round healthy faces. Reuben was proud of them. They were fine children, and he hoped that the one that was coming would be as sturdy.

" How is she ? " he asked Mrs. Backfield.

" She slept a bit this afternoon. I took her a cup of tea at five, but I think the heat tries her."

" I'll go up and see her soon as I've finished—Harry, täake your hand out of the baby's pläate."

As soon as the supper was over, Reuben still munching bread and bacon went up to his wife's room. The sunlight was gone, but the sky was blood-red behind Boarzell's hulk, and a flushed afterglow hung on the ceiling and moved slowly like a fire over the bed. The corners of the room, the shadows cast by the furniture, were black and smoky. On Naomi's face, on her body

outlined under the sheet, the lights crimsoned and smouldered. There was a strange fiery reflection in her eyes as she turned them to the door.

" Well, my dear, how are you ? "

" I'm very well, thank you, Backfield."

She always said that.

He came over to the bed and looked down on her. Her eyes were haunting . . . and the vestiges of youth about her face. But he no longer pitied or spared. Boarzell had taught him his first lesson—that only the hard shall triumph in the hard fight, and that he who would spare his brother shall do no better than he who would spare himself.

He sat down beside her and took her hand.

" I hear you had some sleep this afternoon."

" Yes—I slept for an hour. I think I'm better."

Her voice was submissive—or indifferent.

" I've bin on the new land all to-day. It's doing justabout splendid. Those oats are as dentical as wheat —not a sedge-leaf adin them."

She made a faint sound to show that she had heard him.

" Albert's bin in the orchard scaring sparrers, and Robert and Pete wur helping wud the chickens. My family's gitting quite valiant now, Mrs. Backfield."

" Yes."

" I'll soon be able to have Richard on, and then there's still Jemmy to foller—and George."

" Mmm."

" Now döan't you put me off wud Georgina."

Her mouth stretched mechanically into a smile, and at the same time a tear slid out of the corner of her eye, and rolled slowly over her thin cheeks. In the red, smouldering light of the sky behind Boarzell it looked like a tear of blood.

§ 14.

Early in September George arrived. Reuben's face kindled when the doctor told him he had escaped Georgina.

The doctor, however, did not look pleased.

"Perhaps now you have enough boys?" he said rather truculently.

"Well. there's six . . ."

"I hope that's enough to satisfy you. Because there won't be any more—— She's dying."

"Dying!"

He repeated the word almost stupidly.

"Yes"—said Dr. Espinette. He did not feel inclined to mince matters with Backfield.

"But—but—can't you do anything for her, surelye?"

"I'm afraid not. Of course, one can never speak with absolute certainty even in a case like this. But——" and the doctor wasted some medical technicalities on Reuben.

The young man turned from him, half-dazed. Dying! Naomi! A sudden wild pang smote through his heart for the mother of his children.

"Do something for her! you can—you must."

"I'm going over to Gablehook now, but I'll call in on the way back. I'm afraid there's not much hope; however, I'll do my best."

Reuben's sudden pallor and blank eyes had softened his heart a little. But, he reflected the next moment, there was no sense in pitying Backfield.

Reuben did not wait any longer—he dashed out of the room and upstairs to his wife's door.

He knocked. From within came a faint sound of moaning. He knocked again. The midwife opened the door.

"Go away," she said, "we can't let you in."

"I want to see Naomi."

"You can't."

"I must. Hem it! äun't I her husband?"

"You can come back in an hour or two. But you must go now—" and she shut the door in his face.

Reuben slunk away, angry and miserable.

He pottered about the farm all the morning. Somehow these terrible events reminded him of the birth of his first child, when he had moped and fretted and sulked—and all for nothing. That seemed twenty years ago. Now he did not fret for nothing. His wife was dying, still young, still sometimes beautiful. His mind was full of jumbled memories of her—he saw her as Harry's sweetheart, sitting with him on Boarzell while he sang; he saw her in the dairy where he had first kissed her stooping over the cream; he saw her as his bride, flushed and timid beside him at the wedding-feast, as the mother of his boys, proud and full-bosomed. But mostly his thoughts were more trivial and tattered—memories of her in certain gowns, in a cap she had bought because, having three little boys, she thought she must "dress older"; memories of little things she had said—"Why don't you keep bees, Reuben? Why don't you keep bees? They're such pretty things, and I like the honey. . . ."

Towards two in the afternoon he came in, tired and puff-eyed with misery, his brain all of a jangle. "Why don't you keep bees, Reuben? Why don't you keep bees?"

He sat down at the table which the children had left, and mechanically began to eat. His healthy young body claimed its dues, and almost without knowing it he cleared the plate before him. Harry sat in the chimney corner, murmuring, "Why döan't you kip bees, Reuben? Why döan't you kip bees?"—showing that he had uttered his thoughts aloud, just as the

empty platters showed him he had made a very good dinner.

At last, strengthened by the food, he went up to Naomi's room again. This time he was admitted.

She lay propped high on the pillows, and he was astonished to see how well she looked, much better than before the baby was born. The infant George lay like a rather ugly doll on his grandmother's lap. He was not so healthy as the other children, indeed for a time it had been doubtful whether he would live.

Naomi smiled feebly, and that smile, so wan, so patient, so utterly wistful, so utterly unregretful, with which almost every mother first greets the father of her child, went straight to Reuben's heart. He fell on his knees by the bed, and covered her hand and her thin arm with kisses.

" Naomi, my darling, my love, git well—you mustn't die and leave me."

Actually his tears fell on her hand, and a rather bitter compassion for him drove away the more normal mood. He had killed her, and he was sorry for it. But if he had it all to do over again he would do it, for the sake of the land which was so much more to him than her life.

" My sweet," he murmured, holding her palm against his mouth, " my liddle creature, my liddle sweet. Git well, and you shan't never have to go through this agäun. Six boys is all I'll want to help me, surelye—and you shall rest and be happy, liddle wife, and be proud of your children and the gurt things they're going to do."

She smiled with that same bitter compassion, and stroked his head with her feeble hand.

" How thick your hair is," she said, and weakly took a handful of it, as she had sometimes done when she was well.

When he left her, ten minutes later, she struck him as better. He could not quite smother the hope that Dr.

Espinette was mistaken and that she would recover with nursing and care. After all, even the doctor himself had said that one could never be certain. He felt his spirits revive, and called Beatup to go with him to the hop-fields.

Naomi heard him tramp off, talking of "goldings" and "fuggles." She lay very still, hoping that the light would soon go, and give rest to her tired eyes—but she was too utterly weary to ask Mrs. Backfield to draw the curtains. Her mother-in-law put the baby back in its cradle, then sat down at the foot of the bed, folding her arms over her breast. She was tired after her labours in the house and in the sick-room, and soon she began to doze. Naomi felt more utterly alone than before.

Her fingers plucked nervously at the sheet. There seemed to be a strange tickling irritation in her skin, while her feet were dreadfully cold. She wondered rather dully about the baby—she supposed he could not come to any harm over there in the cradle by himself, but really she did not care much—it was all one to her what happened to him.

Gradually the sun slanted and glowed, and a faint ripple of air stole into the room, lifting the hair on her forehead, tangled and damp. It struck her that she must be looking very ugly—she who had used to be such a pretty girl.

The light trembled and pearled, and in a swift last clearness she saw the great Moor rolling up against the sky, purple with heather, golden with gorse, all strength and life. It seemed to mock her savagely—"I live—you die. You die—I live." It was this hateful land which had killed her, to which she had been sacrificed, and now it seemed to flaunt its beauty and life and vigour before her dying eyes. "I live—you die. You die—I live."

Yes, she was dying—and she hoped that she would die

before Reuben came back. She did not want to feel again that strange, half-bitter compassion for him. The tears ran quite fast down her cheeks, and her eyes were growing dim. This was the end, and she knew it. The evening was full of tender life, but for her it was the end. Ambition and folly had stolen her out of all this freshness before the spring of her life had run. She was like a young birch tree blighted with its April leafage half uncurled.

The tears splashed and dribbled on, till at last for some purely physical reason they stopped. Then a familiar tune swam into her head. She had been told of people who heard music when they were dying.

"At last when your pride shall have brought you to sorrow,
And years of remorse and despair been your fate,
Perhaps your cold heart will remember Seth's Manor,
And turn to your true love—and find it too late."

But her mind was too dim even for regrets. Instead, she seemed to see herself dancing with Reuben at Boarzell Fair, when the dusk had been full of strange whirling lights, whispers, and kisses.

Dancing! . . . dancing! . . . Dying! . . . dying! Even the tune had faded now, and she could see nothing —only a grey patch where the window had been. She was not frightened, only very lonely. Her legs were like ice, and the inside of her mouth felt all rough and numb.

. . . Even the window had faded. Her head had fallen sideways on the pillow, and behind Boarzell the sky had kindled into a sheet of soaring triumphant flame.

"I live—you die. You die—I live."

BOOK III

THE ELDER CHILDREN

§ 1.

FOR some time after Naomi's death Reuben was sick with grief. Her going had been so cruel, so unexpected — and he could not forget how they had found her, her eyelashes wetted with tears.

He also missed her in the house—her soft pale face and gentle ways. He forgot the sallowness and the peevishness of later years, and pictured her always with creamy roseal skin and timid voice. He was the only one who missed her. Mrs. Backfield's softer feelings seemed to have been atrophied by hard work—she grew daily more and more like a machine; the children were too young to care much, and Harry was incapable of regret. However, the strange thing about Harry was that he did indeed seem to miss someone, but not Naomi. For the first time since little Fanny's death he began to ask for her, and search for her about the house—"Where's the pretty baby?—oh, save the pretty baby!" he would wail—"she's gone, she's gone—the pretty baby's gone."

Reuben, as was usual with him, tried to drown sorrow in hard work. He spent his whole day either in the yard or in the fields or out on Boarzell. He was digging a ditch round his new land, to let off the winter rain, and throughout the cool November damps he was on the Moor, watching the sunset's fiery glow behind the gorse, seeing the red clay squash and crumble

thickly under his spade—spouting out drops of blood. In time all this fire and blood brought him back into his old purpose. Gradually the lust of conquest drove away regret. He had no more cause for self-reproach than an officer who loses a good soldier in battle. It is the fortune of war. And Naomi had not died without accomplishing her work and giving him men to help him in the fight.

The young Backfields were beginning to grow into individualities. Albert, the eldest, was eight, and showed certain tokens of a wilful nature, which had not much chance where his father was concerned. Strange fits of dreaminess alternated with vigorous fits of passion. He was a difficult child to manage, for in addition to his own moods he had a certain corrupting influence over his more docile brothers. Reuben already kept him at work most of the day—either at the village school, or scaring birds from the orchard or the grain fields.

Robert and Peter also did their share, feeding fowls, weeding vegetables. Robert was a stolid, well-behaved child, a trifle uninteresting, but hard-working and obedient. Pete was Reuben's delight—a wonderfully sturdy little fellow, who often amazed his father and Beatup by his precocious feats of strength. To amuse them he would sometimes shoulder Beatup's tools, or pick up a bag of chicken-meal with his teeth—he could even put his back against a young calf and prevent it entering a gate or reaching its stall. Reuben was careful not to let him strain himself, but he loved to handle his son's arms and shoulders, feeling the swell of the muscles under the skin. He even taught him the rudiments of boxing ; he had had some practice himself as a boy in the Fair sparring booth, and though of late years he had been too busy to keep it up, he was a good teacher for little Pete, who could soon lick all his brothers and even deliver respectable punishment on Beatup's

nether limbs. Richard at the age of six was not of any great agricultural value, but at the village school he outshone the elder boys. Sometimes he gave Reuben anxious moments, for the smell of the midden now and then made him sick, which was scarcely a hopeful sign.

The younger children were to their father so many bundles—meek and mute, but good to count as they sat at table with porridge bowls and staring eyes. It never occurred to him to pick any of them up and caress them. Indeed they had no very distinct personalities apart from Odiam, though Tilly sometimes looked uncomfortably like Naomi.

§ 2.

Towards the end of '53, Reuben bought a pedigree bull at Rye market. He knew that he could increase his importance and effectiveness in the neighbourhood if he started as a cattle-breeder, and there was also a sound profit to be made by the animal's hiring fees. The next year he bought ten acres more of Boarzell for grass.

He had now spent the whole of Naomi's dowry, and knew that he was not likely to get anything more out of old Gasson, whose housekeeper had during the last year smartly married him. However, he felt that the money had been laid out to the very best advantage, for Odiam was paying its way, and had, besides, of late become the most important farm in the neighbourhood except Grandturzel. Reuben watched Grandturzel jealously, though he was careful to hide his feelings. It had the advantage of forty acres of Boarzell, granted by the commissioners. Luckily old Realf was not very enterprising.

In spite of the farm's new activities, he found that he could still manage without engaging fresh labour. The odds and ends of work which his boys took off him and

Beatup left them free to attack the bigger enterprises. And as Odiam grew the children would grow. Even now they were all impressed for service, except little George, who was delicate and, moreover, subject to fits. Their work was varied—they scared birds from the crops, fed the poultry, collected the eggs, drove the cows to and from pasture, fed the pigs, ran errands to the neighbouring farms. In course of time Albert learned milking, and could saddle old Crump the roan, or put him into the gig.

Then, in the house, the little girls were useful. Mrs. Backfield was not so energetic as she used to be. She had never been a robust woman, and though her husband's care had kept her well and strong, her frame was not equal to Reuben's demands; after fourteen years' hard labour, she suffered from rheumatism, which though seldom acute, was inclined to make her stiff and slow. It was here that Caro and Tilly came in, and Reuben began to appreciate his girls. After all, girls were needed in a house—and as for young men and marriage, their father could easily see that such follies did not spoil their usefulness or take them from him. Caro and Tilly helped their grandmother in all sorts of ways—they dusted, they watched pots, they shelled peas and peeled potatoes, they darned house-linen, they could even make a bed between them.

Needless to say there was not much playtime at Odiam.

§ 3.

During the next ten years the farm went forward by strides. Reuben bought seven more acres of Boarzell in '59, and fourteen in '60. He also bought a horse-rake, and threshed by machinery. He was now a topic in every public-house from Northiam to Rye. His success and the scant trouble he took to conciliate those about him had made him disliked. Unprosperous farmers

spoke windily of " spoiling his liddle game." Ditch and Ginner even suggested to Vennal that they should club together and buy thirty acres or so of the Moor themselves, just to spite him. However, money was too precious to throw away even on such an object, especially as everyone felt sure that Backfield would sooner or later " bust himself " in his dealings with Boarzell.

After all, he had only fifty-six acres out of a possible three hundred, and had not made much profit out of them, judging by the austerity of ways at Odiam. Horse-rakes and steam-threshers could not blind his neighbours to the absence of muslin curtains and butcher's meat. " And the way he's working them pore childer, too . . . all of 'em hard at it from mornun till evenun, surelye . . . enough to make their mother turn in her grave, pore girl . . . not but wot she hadn't every reason to expect it, considering the way he treated her," etc. etc.

At Flightshot Manor comment was more enlightened.

" I can't understand, papa," said Anne Bardon, " how you can go on selling land to that odious Backfield."

" Well, my dear, he pays me good money for it, and I'm in precious need of that just now."

" But in time the whole Moor will fall into his hands —see if it doesn't. And he's a Tory, a reactionary. It would be a dreadful thing for the parish if he became a big landowner."

Anne's politics were the most vigorous in the family.

" My dear, if anyone else would buy the Moor, I'd be only too pleased to sell it to them. But so far there hasn't been a nibble. Backfield's the only man who has the temerity to think he could make anything out of a desert like Boarzell, and I must say I admire his pluck."

" It's only because he has no imagination. He's a thick-skinned brute, and I hate the idea of a man like that becoming powerful. Why don't you give the land back to the parish? Acknowledge that grandpapa's

inclosure has failed, and let the people have their common again."

"It's all very well for you to talk, Anne," said her brother Ralph, "you have your godmamma's fortune, and don't need to think of money. But papa and I have to think of it, and after all we're making a little, a very little, out of Boarzell—just enough to keep up the Village Institute. As time goes on, and Backfield gets richer and more ambitious, we shall sell larger pieces at higher rates, and then we'll be able to repair those wretched cottages at Socknersh, and do a lot more besides."

"I think it would be better if you gave up the Institute and let the cottages tumble down. It's no good trying to raise the people if you leave a man like Backfield loose among them."

"I think you exaggerate his importance, and fail to realise that of the improvements we are making in Peasmarsh. I can't help thinking, as most of the people round here think, that Backfield will, as they call it, 'bust himself' over the Moor. After all he's not educated, and an uneducated man is hampered even in the least intellectual undertakings."

"I do not agree with you, papa."

Anne turned away from her father and brother, and walked towards the window. She disliked arguing, she thought it undignified. She was a tall woman, about twenty-eight years old, severely yet rather imposingly dressed, with a clear complexion, grey eyes, and a nose which was called by her friends aquiline, by her enemies hooked. She despised the Squire in his truck with Odiam, yet she was too fair-minded not to see the considerations that weighed him. And even she, as she gazed from the window, at the southward heap of Boarzell — stony, gorsy, heather-shagged, and fir-crowned—could not withhold a certain admiration from the man who expected of his own arm and tool to subdue it

§ 4.

The Crimean War had meant the stoppage for a time of Russian grain supplies, and Reuben had taken every advantage of this. He had some forty acres under grain cultivation, mostly oats, but also some good kinds of wheat and barley. In rotation with these were peas and clover, turnips and mangolds. He also had twenty acres of hops—the rest was pasture for his neat Dutch and Jersey cows, which, with the orchard and poultry yard, were still the most profitable if not the most glorious of his exploits. The bull had not proved so splendid an investment as he had hoped ; the farmers of the district could not afford big hiring fees, and at present his space was too limited for extensive breeding of his own stock. However, he exhibited Alfriston King at Lewes Agricultural Show, and won a first prize for him. The next year he sold him to a big cattle breeder down Horeham way, and bought a cheaper but more serviceable animal for his own business.

His sons were now growing up—Albert was nearly eighteen, and Peter, though a year younger, looked a full-grown man, with his immense build and dark hairy skin. Pete was still the most satisfactory of Reuben's children, he had a huge and glad capacity for work, and took a real interest in Odiam's progress, though it was not his life, as it was his father's. It was strange, Reuben thought, that none of the other boys seemed to have a glimmer of enthusiasm. Though they had grown up under the shadow of Boarzell, and from their earliest childhood taken part in the struggle, they seemed still to think more about the ordinary things of young men's lives than the great victory before them. It was disappointing. Of course one expected it of girls, but Reuben's heart ached a little because the men children on whom he had set such hope and store cared

so little about what was life itself to him. It is true that Robert worked well, nearly as well as Pete, but that was only because he was of a docile, tractable nature. He did not share his father's dreams—Boarzell to him was only a piece of waste ground with some trees on it.

As for Albert and Richard, they did not even work well, and they grumbled and shirked as much as they dared. They had ambitions, but so utterly at variance with Odiam's as to be worse than none. Albert wanted to be a poet and Richard to be a gentleman.

What there was in either Reuben or Naomi to make a poet of their eldest son would be hard to say. Perhaps it was the glow of their young love, so golden and romantic during the first year of their marriage. If so, there was something of bitter irony in this survival and transmutation of it. Odiam was no place for poets, and Reuben tried by every means in his power to knock the poetry out of Albert. It was not the actual poetry he objected to so much as the vices which went with it—forgetfulness, unpracticalness, negligence. Albert would sometimes lose quite half an hour's work by falling into a dream, he also played truant on occasions, and would disappear for hours, indeed now and then for a day or more, wandering in the fields and spinneys, tasting the sharp sweetness of the dawn and the earth-flavoured sleep of the night.

For though he did not care for Odiam he loved the country round it, and made a wonderland and a dreamland of it. He did not see in Boarzell Robert's tree-capped waste, though neither did he see his father's enemy and heart's delight. He saw instead a kind of enchanted ground, full of mysteries of sun and moon, full of secrets that were sometimes beautiful, sometimes terrifying. It seemed to have a soul and a voice, a low voice, hoarse yet sweet; and its soul was not the soul of a man or of a beast, but the soul of a fetch, some country sprite, that clumped, and yet could skip . . . he

used to feel it skipping with him in the evening wind when the dusk made the heather misty round his knees . . . but he knew that it danced heavy-footed round the farm at night, clumping, clumping, like a clod.

Reuben had no sympathy with these fancies when they took his son out of hard-working common sense into idle-handed, wander-footed dreams, or when perhaps he found them scribbled on the back of his corn accounts. He did not spare the rod, but Albert had all the rather futile obstinacy of weak-willed people, and could be neither persuaded nor frightened out of his dreams.

However, though he was a great trouble to his father, he was not so irritating as Richard. He had the advantage that one could lay hands on him and vent one's fury in blows, but Richard had an extraordinary knack of keeping just on the safe side of vengeance. For one thing he was the best educated of all Reuben's children, and the result of education had been not so much to fill his mind as to sharpen his wits to a formidable extent. For another, he loathed to be beaten, and used all his ingenuity to avoid it. Reuben could flog Albert for going off to the Moor when he was told to clean out the pigsties, but he could not flog Richard for being sick at his first spadeful. As a matter of fact he did actually perpetrate this cruelty when Richard's squeamishness caused him any gross inconvenience, but there was no denying that the boy was on the whole successful in avoiding his dues.

Richard had been the brightest light in the Misses Harmans' school. His teachers had often praised him, and on one occasion suggested in their ignorance that he should take up a more intellectual trade than farming. Then when the Curate-in-Charge had inspected the school he had been struck by Richard's clever, thoughtful answers, and had, for some months after his leaving, lent him books. Reuben on discovering this, had gone

over at once to the parsonage, and with all the respect due to a Minister of the Established Church, had informed Mr. Munk that he didn't want no nonsense put into his boy's head, and spades and spuds were for Richard's hands, not books.

"I'm going to mäake a farmer of un, your reverence."

"But he says he doesn't want to be a farmer."

"That's why I've got to *mäake* un one, surelye."

§ 5.

Reuben had sold Alfriston King for two hundred pounds, and this new capital made possible another enterprise—he bought twenty head of sheep. For some time he had considered the advantages of keeping sheep. It was quite likely that his new land on Boarzell would be mostly pasture, at all events for some time to come, and sheep, properly managed, ought to be a good source of revenue as well as a hall-mark of progress. He did not want Odiam to be a farm of one idea; his father had kept it ambitionlessly to grass, but Reuben saw grain-growing, dairy-keeping, cattle-breeding, sheep-rearing, hops, and fruit, and poultry as branches of its greatness.

He decided that the sheep should be Richard's special charge—they, at all events, could not make him sick; and if he was kept hard at work at something definite and important it would clear his mind of gentility nonsense. Reuben also had rather a pathetic hope that it might stir up his ambition.

Richard grumbled of course, but discreetly. His brothers were inclined to envy him—Albert saw more romance and freedom in keeping sheep than in digging roots or cleaning stables, Pete was jealous of an honour the recipient did not appreciate, Robert and Jemmy would have liked a new interest in their humdrum lives. Richard was initiated into the mysteries of his art by a

superannuated shepherd from Doozes, only too glad of a little ill-paid casual labour.

None of the Backfield boys was ever paid a penny of wages. Reuben's idea in employing them was to save money, besides he feared that his young men with full pockets might grow independent. It was essential to his plan that he should keep them absolutely dependent on him, otherwise they might leave home, marry without his consent, or at best fritter away their—or rather his—time by running after girls or drinking at pubs. It is true that now and then stalwart Pete made a few shillings in the sparring-booth at the Fair, but Reuben could trust Pete in a way he could not trust the other boys, so he did not offer much objection.

Pete had once given a shilling to Richard, who had bought with it a second-hand Latin grammar, which he kept carefully hidden under his pillow by night, and in his pocket by day. He had an idea that the mastery of its obscurities would give him a key to freedom, but he had had so far little opportunity of studying it, as he worked and slept with his brothers. Richard did not extort the same sympathy for his rebellion as Albert. Albert had a certain influence over Pete and Jemmy, which he maintained partly by a definite charm of personality, partly by telling them tales after they were in bed at night. They had never betrayed his copy of Byron, also bought with a shilling from Pete, but Richard dared not trust them with his Lilly. Some day he would manage to irritate them—show his contempt for their bearish manners, scoff at their talk, or otherwise insult them—and they would deliver him over, grammar and all, into his father's hands.

His new occupation, however, gave him undreamed-of opportunities. One of the advantages of shepherding was that it alternated periods of strenuous work with others of comparative idleness. During these Richard would pore over his "hic, hæc, hoc," and parse and analyse on

bits of waste paper. He learned very quickly, and was soon casting about for means to buy a Greek grammar. He felt that his father could not possibly keep him at the farm if he knew both Latin and Greek.

Thus Richard lived through the feasts and fasts of the Shepherd's Year. In spring there were hazy, drowsy days when he sat with his book under the hedge—some hole close by where he could stuff it if Reuben came that way—now and then lifting an eye to the timid, foolish faces buried in the sun-stained meadow-grass. Then later came the dipping, the collie Havelock barking and blustering at one end of the bath, while old Comfort poked the animals through it with his crook, and Richard received them terrified and evil-smelling at the other side. He grew furious because his hands were all sore and blistered with the dip. Reuben laughed at him grossly—" Yur granny shall mäake you a complexion wash, surelye ! "

Then came the shearing, that queen of feasts. The local band of shearers called at Odiam for the first time, and were given an inaugural welcome. Richard sulked at the honour paid him as shepherd—he felt it was indeed a case of King among Sweepers. However, in point of fact, he enjoyed the actual shearing well enough. It was a warm July day, the air full of the scent of hayseed ; the sheep came hustling and panting into the shearing-pens, and the shearers stripped them with songs and jokes and shouts of " Shear close, boys ! " There was also ale in buckets, brought out by a girl hired for the occasion, who was stout and pretty and smiled at Richard. And it was good to watch the yellowish piles of fleece grow at one's knees, and comical to see the poor shorn sheep stagger up from the ground, all naked and confused, hardly knowing themselves, it seemed.

When the shearing was done there was supper in the kitchen at Odiam, with huge drinks of " black ram," and sheep-shearing songs such as " Come, all my jolly

boys," and "Here the rose-buds in June." Also the Sussex Whistling Song:

> "There was an old Farmer in Sussex did dwell,
> And he had a bad wife, as many knew well."

But Richard did not enjoy the supper as much as the shearing, for most of the men over-ate themselves, and all of them over-drank. Also the pretty serving-girl forsook him for Albert, who on one occasion was actually seen to put his arm round her waist, and hold it there till a scowl from his father made him drop it.

Then in winter came the lambing, which is the shepherd's Lent. Richard and the old man from Doozes kept long vigils in the lambing hut, and those nights and days were to young Backfield dreams of red, fuggy solitude, the stillness broken only by the slip of coals in the brazier, or the faint bleating of the ewes outside—while sometimes mad Harry's fiddle wept down the silences of Boarzell.

Richard began to take a new interest in his flock—hitherto they had merely struck him as grotesque. Their pale silly eyes, their rough, tic-ridden fleeces, their scared repulsiveness after the dipping, their bewildered nakedness after the shearing, had filled him either with amusement or disgust; but now, when he saw them weakly lick the backs of their new-born lambs, while the lambs' little tails quivered, and tiny, entreating sounds came from their mouths, he found in them a new beauty, which he had found nowhere else in his short, hard life—the beauty of an utterly loving, tender, and helpless thing.

He had his Lilly with him in the hut, for there were long hours of idleness as well as of anxiety, but he was careful to hide away the book if Reuben came to inspect; for he knew that his father would have sat through the empty hours in concentration and expectancy, his ears straining for the faintest sound. He would have thought

of nothing but the ewes, and he looked to everyone to think of nothing else. But Richard studied Latin, and the old Doozes man put in plenty of light, easily startled sleep.

§ 6.

Towards the end of February there was a period of intense cold, and some heavy falls of snow. Snow was rare in that south-east corner, and all farm-work was to a certain extent dislocated. Reuben would have liked to spread blankets over his corn-fields and put shirts on his cattle. Adverse weather conditions never failed to stir up his inborn combativeness to its fiercest. His sons trembled as his brain raged with body-racking plans for fighting this new move of nature's. Richard was glad to be away from farmyard exertions, most of which struck him as absurd. He was now busy with the last of his lambing, the snow blew against the hut from the north-east, piling itself till nothing was to be seen from that quarter but a white lump. Inside was a crimson stuffiness, as the fumes of the brazier found their way slowly out of the little tin chimney. Sometimes before the brazier a motherless lamb would lie.

There was a lamb there on the last evening in February, its tiny body and long, weak legs all rosed over with the glow. Above it Richard crouched, grammar in hand. There had been a lull in the snow-storm during the afternoon, but now once more the wind was piping and screaming over the fields and the whiteness heaping itself against the wall.

Suddenly he heard a knock at the door, and before he could answer, it flew open, and the icy blast, laden with snow, rushed in, and whirled round the hut, fluttering the pages of Lilly's grammar and the fleece of the lamb.

"Shut that door!" cried Richard angrily, and then realised that he was speaking to a lady.

She had shut the door, and stood against it, a tall,

rather commanding figure, in spite of her snow-covered garments and dishevelled hair.

"Oh—ma'am!" said Richard, rising to his feet, and recognising Miss Anne Bardon.

"I trust I'm not in the way," she said rather coldly, "but the storm is so violent, and the drifts are forming so fast, that I hope you will not mind my sheltering here."

Richard was embarrassed. Her fine words disconcerted him. He had often watched Miss Bardon from a respectful distance, but had never spoken to her before.

"You're welcome, ma'am," he replied awkwardly, and offered her his chair.

She sat down and held her feet to the brazier. He noticed that her shoes were pulped with wet, and the water was pouring off her skirts to the floor. He did not dare speak, and she evidently did not want to. He felt the colour mounting to his face; he knew that he was dirty and unkempt, for he had been hours in the hut—his hands were grimed from the brazier, and he wore an old crumpled slop. She probably despised him.

Suddenly he noticed that the wet of her garments was dropping on the lamb. He hastily gathered it up in his arms.

"What a dear little creature!"

She spoke quite graciously, and Richard felt his spirits revive.

"His mother's dead, and I have to be looking after him, surelye."

"Poor little thing!"

She asked him a few questions about the lambing, then:

"You're one of Mr. Backfield's sons, are you not?"

"Yes, ma'am. I'm Richard."

"I've seen you before—in church, I think. Are you your father's shepherd?"

" Yes, ma'am."

" Again I hope I am not in your way. I've been over to see the carter's widow at Socknersh—he died two days ago, you know, and she hasn't a penny to go on with. Then when I saw the storm coming I thought I would take a short cut home across the fields ; I was caught after all—and here I am ! "

She smiled suddenly as she finished speaking. It was a sweet smile, rather aloof, but lighting up the whole of her face with a sudden flash of youth and kindness. Richard gazed at her, half fascinated, and mumbled lamely—" you're welcome, ma'am."

She suddenly caught sight of his Latin grammar.

" That's a strange thing to see in a shepherd's hand."

He felt encouraged, for he had wanted her to see the difference between him and an ordinary shepherd, but had been too awkward to show her.

" I've had it three months—I can construe a bit of Horace now."

" *Aequam memento rebus in arduis servare mentem,*" said Anne.

" *Omnes eodem cogimur,*" said Richard, and blushed.

There was silence, but not of the former discouraging sort. Richard was even bold enough to break it :

" I never knew ladies cud speak Latin."

" Some can. I was educated with my brother, you know, and when we construed Horace I was always five or six pages ahead. What made you want to learn Latin ? "

" I want to git out o' this."

" Out of your farm duties, you mean ? "

" Yes."

" But surely your father would let you adopt some other profession if he knew you did not like this one ? "

Richard shook his head.

" He wants justabout all of us—we've got to push on the farm."

" Yes—I know he is ambitious, but surely he doesn't want unwilling helpers."

" Oh, he döan't mind who it is, so long as the work's done."

" And don't you care about the farm ? "

" I, ma'am ?—no. I want to be a gentleman."

Anne was growing interested. This farm boy was gloriously unlike others of his kind that she had met.

" And you think that if you learn Latin, it'll help you be a gentleman someday ? "

" Yes—and Greek, when I've adone wud the Latin."

" Have you many books ? "

" No—only this one."

" Then I must lend you some books."

Richard flushed with pleasure. After all he was not acquitting himself so badly with this fine lady. They talked together for a few more minutes, the boy trying to clip his speech like hers. He noticed how much shorter and crisper it was than his—while he said " döan't," she could say " don't " twice.

They were interrupted by the entrance of the Doozes shepherd, accompanied by a swirl of flakeless wind. The old man was astonished and rather scandalised to find Anne Bardon. She looked positively rakish sitting there in her steaming clothes, her hat over one ear, her hair in wisps, and her face more animated and girlish than any of his kind had ever seen it.

Old Comfort scraped and mumbled, and fussed over the lamb, which the two Latinists had entirely forgotten. Then Richard, seeing himself free and the sky clear, offered to help her through the drifts to Flightshot. She let him accompany her as far as the edge of the Manor estate, where the going was no longer dangerous.

" Your servant, ma'am," he said, as he opened the gate ; and she answered classically :

" Vale ! "

§ 7.

On the whole, the most unsatisfactory of Reuben's sons was Albert. Richard might be more irritating, but Albert had that knack of public sinning which gives a certain spectacular offensiveness to the most trivial faults. Any trouble between Reuben and his eldest son invariably spread itself into the gossip of ten farms ; the covert misdoings of and private reckonings with the other boys gave place to tempestuous scandals, windy stormings, in which Albert contrived to grab the general sympathy, and give a decorative impression of martyrdom.

At the same time he tantalised Reuben with vague hints of enthusiasm, sometimes almost making him think that, undependable and careless as he was, he had in him certain germs of understanding. But these were mere promises that were never fulfilled. Albert would whet Reuben's hopes by asking him questions about the country round : Why was such and such a farm called Stilliand's Tower or Puddingcake ? Why were there about six places called Iden Green within a square of twenty miles ? Was there any story to account for the names of Mockbeggar, Golden Compasses, Castweasel, or Gablehook ? But directly Reuben digressed from these general questions to the holy particulars of Odiam and Boarzell, he would lose his interest and at last even his attention, escaping into some far-wandering dream.

Reuben could not understand how his sons could care so little about that which was all things to him. He had brought them up to his ambitions—they were not like Naomi, thrust into them in later, less-impressionable years. He had not been weak with them, and not been cruel—yet only Pete was at all satisfactory. However, he was not the man to sit down and despair before his obstacles. He made the best of things as they were—

ground work out of his lads, since he could not grind enthusiasm, and trusted to the future to stir up a greater hope. He somehow could not believe that his boys could go through all their lives not caring for Odiam.

Albert continued weakly and picturesquely to offend. He was now nearly twenty-one, and had begun to run after girls in a stupid way. Reuben, remembering how sternly he had deprived himself of pleasures of this kind, ruthlessly spoiled his son's philanderings . . . but the crime he could not forgive, which set the keystone on his and the boy's antagonism, was the publication of some verses by Albert in the *Rye Advertiser*.

To begin with, it was a Liberal paper, and though the verses were of a strictly non-political kind, dealing chiefly with Amelia's eyes, it seemed to Reuben shockingly unprincipled to defile oneself in any way with Radical print. But even without that the thing was criminal and offensive.

"I wöan't have no hemmed poetry in my family!" stormed Reuben, for Albert had as usual stage-managed a "scene." "You've got your work to do, and you'll justabout do it."

"But fäather, it didn't täake up any of my time, writing that poem. I wrote it at my breakfast one mornun two months ago——"

"Yes, that's it—instead of spending twenty minnut at your breakfast, you spend forty. You idle away my time wud your hemmed tricks, and I wöan't have it, I tell you, I wöan't have it. Lord! when I wur your age, I wur running the whole of this farm alone—every ströak of work, I did it. I didn't go wasting time over my meals, and writing rubbidge fur low-down Gladstone päapers. Now döan't you go sassing me back, you young good-fur-nothing, or I'll flay you, surelye!"

Albert could not help a grudging admiration of his father. Reuben could be angry and fling threats, and yet keep at the same time a certain splendour, which no

violence or vulgarity could dim. The boy, in spite of his verses, which were execrable enough, had a poet's eye for the splendid, and he could not be blind to the qualities of his father's tyranny, even though that tyranny crushed him at times. Reuben was now forty-three ; a trifle heavier in build, perhaps, but otherwise as fine and straight a man as he had been at twenty. His clear brown skin, keen eyes, thick coal-black hair, his height, his strength, his dauntless spirit, could not fail to impress one in whom the sense of life and beauty was developing. Albert even once began a poem to his father :

> " You march across the mangold field,
> And all our limbs do shake. . . ."

But somehow found the subject more difficult to grapple than the fascinations of Amelia.

With Richard things were different. He despised Reuben as bestial, and sometimes jeopardised his skin by nearly showing his contempt. He now had a peculiar friendship with Anne Bardon. They had met accidentally a second time, and deliberately half a dozen more. In Richard Anne had made a discovery—he appealed to her imagination, which ran on severe lines. She sympathised with his ambition to break free from the grind and grossness of Odiam, and resolved to help him as much as she could. She lent him books, and guided him with her superior knowledge and education.

Their meetings were secret, from her family as well as his. But they were dignified—there was no scurrying like rabbits. Richard's work kept him mostly on the Flightshot borders of Odiam, and often the grave Anne would walk down to the hedge, and help him construe Tacitus or parse from Ovid. There was an old tree by the boundary fence, in the hollow of which she put new books for him to find, and into which he would return those he had finished. She was very careful to maintain

the right attitude towards him; he was always her humble servant, he never forgot to call her "ma'am."

But the disciple of Anne Bardon could aspire to be master among other men. Richard began to startle and amuse his family by strange new ways. He took to washing his neck every morning, and neatly combed his hair. He cut up an old shirt into pocket-handkerchiefs. He began to model his speech on Miss Bardon's—clipping it, and purging it ridiculously. Reuben would roar with laughter.

"'Pray am I to remove this dirt?'—Did you ever hear such präaperness and denticalness?—all short and soft lik the Squire himself. You wash out all that mucky sharn, my lad, if that's wot you mean."

§ 8.

Robert Backfield was a member of Peasmarsh choir. He had a good, ringing bass voice, which had attracted the clerk's notice, and though Reuben disapproved of his son's having any interests outside Odiam, he realised that as a good Tory he ought to support the Church—especially as the hours of the practices did not clash with Robert's more important engagements.

Peasmarsh choir consisted of about eighteen boys and girls, with an accompaniment of cornets, flutes, and a bass viol—the last played by an immensely aged drover from Coldblow, who, having only three fingers on his left hand, had to compromise, not always tunefully, with the score. The singing was erratic. Eighteen fresh young voices could not fail to give a certain pleasure, but various members had idiosyncrasies which did not make for the common weal—such as young Ditch, who never knew till he had begun to sing whether his voice would be bass or alto, all intermediary pitches being somehow unattainable—or Rosie Hubble from Barline, who was always four bars behind the rest

—or even young Robert himself, who in crises of enthusiasm was wont to sing so loud that his voice drowned everyone else's, or in a wild game of follow-my-leader led the whole anthem to destruction.

Robert loved these choir practices and church singings. Though he never complained of his hard work, he was unconsciously glad of a change from the materialism of Odiam. The psalms with their outbreathings of a clearer life did much to purge even his uncultured soul of its muddlings, the hymns with their sentimental far-awayness opened views into which he would gaze enchanted as into a promised land. He would come in tired and throbbing from the fields, scrape as much mud as possible off his boots, put on his Sunday coat, and tramp through the dusk to the clerk's house . . . the little golden window gleaming to him across Peasmarsh street and pond was the foretaste of the evening's sweetness.

The practices were held in the clerk's kitchen, into which the choristers would crush and huddle. On full attendance nights all elbows touched, and occasionally old Spodgram's bow would be jolted out of his hand, or someone would complain that Leacher was blowing his trumpet down his neck. Afterwards the choristers would wander home in clusters through the fields ; the clusters generally split into small groups, and then the groups into couples. The couples would scatter widely, and vex their homes with late returnings.

Robert was first of all part of a cluster which included young Coalbran from Doozes, Tom Sheane from Dinglesden, the two Morfees from Edzell, Emily Ditch, and Bessie Lamb from Eggs Hole. Then in time the company reduced itself to Robert, Emily, and Bessie—and one wonderful night he found himself with Bessie alone. How they had chosen each other he could not say. All he knew was that for some time she had become woven with the music into his thoughts. She

was a poor labourer's daughter, living in a crumbled, rickety cottage on Eggs Hole Farm, helping her mother look after eight young children. She was only seventeen herself, sturdy yet soft, with a mass of hay-coloured hair, and rather a broad face with wistful eyes. Robert thought she was beautiful—but Robert thought that old Spodgram's playing and the choir's singing were beautiful.

Though they were technically a Couple, they never spoke of love. They never even kissed or held each other's hands, however tenderly the velvet darkness called. He told her about his work at Odiam—about the little calf that was born that day, or the trouble he had had, patching the rent in the pigsty, or how the poultry had not taken well to their new food, but preferred something with more sharps in it. She in her turn would tell him how she had washed little Georgie's shirt—taking advantage of a warm day when he could run about naked—how her mother had lamentable hard pains all down her back, how her father had got drunk at the harvest supper and tried to beat her.

Sometimes they looked in the hedges for birds' nests, or watched the rabbits skipping in the dusk. They would gape up at the stars together and call the constellations by names of their own—Orion was " the gurt tree," and Cassiopeia was " the sheep trough," and Pegasus was " the square meadow."

It was all very wonderful and sweet to Robert, and when at last he crept under the sheets in the apple-smelling garret he would dream of him and Bessie wandering in the Peasmarsh fields—or sometimes in those starry meadows where the hedges shone and twinkled with the fruit of constellations, and Charles drove his waggon along a golden road, and sheep ate from a flickering trough under a great tree of lamps.

§ 9.

Bessie tinted the world for Robert like a sunrise. All through the day he carried memories of lightless woods, of fields hushed in the swale, of the smudge of her old purple cotton beside him—of, perhaps, some dim divine moment when his hand had touched hers hanging at her side.

Then winter came, with carol-singing, and the choristers tramped round, lantern-led, from farm to farm. There in the fluttering light outside Kitchenhour, Old Turk, Ellenwhorne, or Edzell, Robert would watch Bessie's chicory-flower eyes under her hood, while the steam of their breath mingled in the frosty air, and they drooped their heads together, singing to each other, only to each other, "Good King Wenceslas," "As Joseph was a-walking," or "In the Fields with their Flocks."

As they were both simple souls, their love only made the words more real. Sometimes it seemed almost as if they could see up in the white glistering field behind the barn, the manger with the baby in it, the mother watching near, and the ox and the ass standing meekly beside them in the straw. Bessie said she felt sure that the shepherds watched their flocks by night in the little old meadow at the corner of Totease . . . she once thought she had heard them singing. But she would not go and look.

As the year climbed up again into spring, a tender pity for Bessie mingled with Robert's love. It was not the pity which begets love, but the sweeter kind which is begotten of it. Robert forgot all about his own hard life, the monotonous ruthless grind of work, the absence of all softness, homeliness, or sympathy, the denial of all gaiety and sport. He thought only of Bessie's troubles, and would have given the world to lighten

them. He longed to give her some little treat, or a present. But he had no money. For the first time he inwardly rebelled against the system which kept him penniless. None of the boys had any money, except Pete on Fair days—not even Albert, for the *Rye Advertiser* did not pay its poets. For the first time Robert saw this as unjust.

March blew some warm twilights to Peasmarsh, and the choristers began their summer lingering. Bessie and Robert often took the longer way home by Ellenwhorne—he would not leave her now till they were at her cottage door, and often he would run home barefooted from Eggs Hole, afraid that he might be shut out of Odiam, and perhaps his precious comradeship discovered and put under the tyrant's ban.

Then came an evening in April, when the air smelled of primroses and young leaves. The choir practice was early, and rifts of sunshine sloped up the clerk's kitchen, linking in one golden slant Robert's dark healthy face just under the ceiling, Bessie's shoulders pressed against his arm, the frail old hands of Joe Hearsfield on his flute, and the warm plum-brown of the bass viol close to the floor. To Robert it was all a dream of holiness and harmony. Old Spodgram confined himself almost entirely to two notes, Miss Hubble insisted on her four bars of arrears, young Ditch extemporised an alto of surprising reediness, and Robert bellowed the last lines of the last verse just as the other choristers were loudly taking in breath preparatory to line three—but the whole thing was to him a foretaste of Paradise and the angels singing ever world without end.

When the practice was over it was still light, and Robert and Bessie turned inevitably along the little bostal that trickles through the fields towards Ramstile. As usual they did not speak, but in each glowed the thought that they had a full two hours to live through together in the mystery of these sorrowless fields.

The sun set as they came to Ellenwhorne. They stood and watched it dip behind the little cluster of roofs and oast-houses in the west. The turrets of the oasts stood out black against the crimson, then suddenly they purpled, faded into their background of night-washed cloud.

The fields were very dark in their low corners, only their high sweeps shimmered in the ghostly lemon glow. Out of the rabbit-warrens along the hedges, from the rims of the woods, ran the rabbits to scuttle and play. Bessie and Robert saw the bob of their white tails through the dusk, and now and then a little long-eared shape.

The boy and girl were still silent. But in the consciousness each had of the other, kindled and spread a strange dear poignancy. They walked side by side through the dusk, now faintly cold. Dew began to tremble and shine on the grass, to pearl the brambles and glimmer on the twigs.

Robert looked sideways at Bessie. She was colourless in the dark, or rather coloured all over with the same soft grey, which gathered up into itself the purple of her gown and the pale web of her hair. In her eyes was a quiver of starlight.

Their feet splashed on the soaking grass, and suddenly Bessie stopped and lifted her shoe :

" It's justabout wet, Robby."

He looked.

" So it be—I shudn't have brought you through all this damp grass. We shud have gone by the lane, I reckon."

" Oh, no," she breathed, and her voice and the half-seen glimmer of her eyes troubled him strangely.

" Lookee, I'll carry you—you mustn't git wet."

She opened her lips to protest, but the sound died on them, for he stooped and swept her up in his arms. She slipped her hand to his neck to steady herself, and they went forward again towards the south.

Bessie was a sturdily built little person, but the weight of her was a rich delight, and if his arms strained, they strained with tenderness as well as with effort. Under them her frock crushed and gave out a fragrance of crumpled cotton, her hand was warm against his neck, and on his cheek tickled her soft hair. The shadows ran towards them from the corners of the field, slipping like ghosts over the grass, and one or two pale stars kindled before them, where the sky dropped into the woods. . . . An owl lifted his note of sadness, which wandered away over the fields to Ellenwhorne. . . .

Her young face bowed to his neck, and suddenly his lips crept round and lay against the coolness of her cheek. She did not move, and he still walked on, the grass splashing under his feet, the rabbits scampering round him, showing their little cotton-tails in the dark.

Then his mouth stole downwards and groped for hers. Their lips fluttered together like moths. Then suddenly she put her arms round his neck, and strained his head to her, and kissed him and kissed him, with queer little sobs in her throat. . . .

He still walked on through the deepening night and skipping rabbits. He never paused, just carried her and kissed her ; and she kissed him, stroking his face with her hands—and all without a word.

At last they reached the lane by Eggs Hole Cottage, which with shimmering star-washed front looked towards the south. He stopped, and she slid to the ground. Then suddenly the words came.

" Oh, my liddle thing ! My dear liddle thing . . . my sweet liddle thing ! "

" Robby, Robby. . . ."

They kissed each other again and again, eagerly like children, but with the tears of men and women in their eyes.

" Robby . . . I love you . . . I love you so ! "

" Oh, you liddle thing ! "

They were hungry . . . their arms wound about each other and their faces pressed close, now cheek to cheek, now with lips fluttering together in those sweet kisses of youth which have so much of shyness in their passion.

Suddenly a light kindled in the little house. Bessie slipped from him, and ran up the pathway into the dark gape of the door.

§ 10.

In August Reuben bought ten more acres of Boarzell, and the yoke tightened on Odiam. All had now been pressed into service, even the epileptic George. From morning till night feet tramped, hoofs stamped, wheels rolled, backs bent, arms swung. Reuben himself worked hardest of all, for to his actual labour must be added long tramps from one part of the farm to the other to superintend his sons' work. Besides, he would allow nothing really important to be undertaken without him. He must be present when the first scythe swept into the hay, when his wonderful horse-reaper took its first step along the side of the cornfield, he must himself see to the spreading of the hops over the drying furnaces in the oasts, or rise in the cold twinkling hour after midnight to find out how Buttercup was doing with her calf.

Pete made an able and keen lieutenant, but the other boys were still disappointing. It is true that Benjamin worked well and was often smart enough, but he had a roving disposition, which was more dangerous than Albert's, since it led him invariably down to the muddy Rother banks at Rye, where the great ships stood in the water, filling the air with good smells of fish and tar. Jemmy would loaf for hours round the capstans and building-stocks, and the piles of muddy rope that smelled of ooze, and he would talk to the sailormen and fishermen about voyages to the Azores and the Cape or to the wild seas south of the Horn, and would come home prating of sails and smoke-stacks, charts and logs,

and other vain things that had nothing to do with Odiam. Reuben remembered that the boy's mother came of a family of ship-builders and sailormen, and he would tremble for Jemmy's allegiance, and punish his truancies twice as severely as Albert's.

Another trial to him now was that Robert seemed half-hearted. Hitherto he had always worked conscientiously and well, even though he had never been smart or particularly keen ; but now he seemed to loaf and slack—he dawdled, slipped clear of what he could, and once he actually asked Reuben for wages ! This was unheard-of—not one of Reuben's sons had ever dreamed of such a thing before.

" Wages !—wot are you wanting wages fur, young räascal ? You're working to save money, not to earn it. You wait till all yon Moor is mine, and Odiam's the biggest farm in Sussex, before you ask fur wages."

Up till then Robert had never troubled much about money. He did not want to buy books like Albert and ichard, neither did he care for drinking in Rye pubs with fishermen like Jemmy. But now everything was changed. He wanted money for Bessie. He wanted to marry her, and he must have money for that, no matter how meanly they started ; and also he wanted to give her treats and presents, to cheer the dullness of her life. Reuben had indeed been wise in trying to keep the girls away from his sons !

There are no two such things for sharpening human wits as fullness of love and shortness of cash. Robert's brain was essentially placid and lumbering, but under this double spur it began to work wonders. After much pondering he thought of a plan. It was part of his duties to snare rabbits on Boarzell. Every evening he went round and inspected the traps, killed any little squealing prisoners that were in them, and sold them on market days at Rye. It was after all an easy thing to report and hand over the money for ten rabbits a

week, while keeping the price of, say, three more, and any other man would have thought of it sooner.

In this way he managed to do a few little things to brighten Bessie's grey life—and his own too, though he did not know it was grey. Every week he put aside a shilling or two towards the lump sum which was at last to make their marriage possible. It was Reuben's fight for Boarzell on an insignificant scale—though Robert, who had not so much iron in him as his father, could not resist spending money from time to time on unnecessary trifles that would give Bessie happiness. For one thing he discovered that she had never been to the Fair. She had never known the delights of riding on the merry-go-round, throwing balls at Aunt Sally, watching the shooting or the panorama. Robert resolved to take her that autumn, and bought her a pair of white cotton gloves in preparation for the day.

Unluckily, however, he was not made for a career of prolonged fraud, and he ingloriously foundered in that sea of practical details through which the cunning man must steer his schemes. He fixed the number of rabbits to be sold at Rye as ten a week, pocketing the surplus whether it were one or six. This was a pretty fair average, but its invariable occurrence for seven or eight weeks could not fail to strike Reuben, whose brain was not placid and slow-moving like his son's.

The one thing against the idea that Robert was swindling him was that he thought Robert utterly incapable of so much contrivance. However, he had noticed several changes in the boy of late, and he resolved to wait another two weeks, keeping his eyes open and his tongue still. Each week ten rabbits were reported sold at Rye and the money handed over to him. On the morning of the next market day, when Robert's cart, piled with eggs, fruit, vegetables, and poultry, was at the door, Reuben came out and inspected it.

"Let's see your conies," he said briefly.

It was as if someone had suddenly laid a cold hand on Robert's heart. He guessed that his father suspected him. His ears turned crimson, and his hands trembled and fumbled as he opened the back of the cart and took out his string of properly skinned and gutted conies.

Reuben counted them—ten. Then he pushed them aside, and began rummaging in the cart among cabbages and bags of apples. In a second or two he had dragged out five more rabbits. Robert stood with hanging head, flushed cheeks, and quivering hands, till his father fulfilled his expectations by knocking him down.

"So that's the way you queer me, you young villain. You steal, you hide, you try to bust the farm. It's luck you're even a bigger fool than you are scamp, and I've caught you justabout purty."

He kicked Robert, and called up Richard to drive the cart over to Rye.

An hour later the whole of the boy's plans, and worse still his sinews of war, were in the enemy's possession. Reuben ransacked his son's mind as easily as he ransacked his pockets and the careful obvious little hiding-place under his mattress where lay the twenty-two shillings of which he had defrauded Odiam. His love for Bessie, his degraded and treacherous hopes, filled the father with shame. Had he then lived so meanly that such mean ambitions should inspire his son?

"A cowman's girl!" he groaned, "at Eggs Hole, too, where they döan't know plums from damsons! Marry her! I'd sooner have Albert and his wenches."

"I love her," faltered Robert.

"Well, you'll justabout have to stop loving her, that's all. I'm not going to have my pläace upset by love. Love's all very well when there's something wud it or when there's nothing in it. But marrying cowmen's girls wudout a penny in their pockets, we can't afford to kip that sort o' love at Odiam."

"Fäather," pleaded Robert, "you loved my mother."

"Yes—but she wur a well-born lady wud a fortun. D'you think I'd have let myself love her if she'd bin poor and a cowman's daughter? Not me, young feller!"

"But you can't help loving, surelye."

"Well, if that's wot you think, the sooner you find out that you can help loving the better. Did I ever hear such weak womanish slop! Help loving? You'll help it before you're many days older. Meantime you kip away from that girl, and all them hemmed choir-singings which are the ruin of young people."

The colour rushed into Robert's cheeks, and something very unfamiliar and very unmanly into his eyes.

"I'll——" he began desperately. But even Robert had the wit not to finish his sentence.

§ 11.

For the next two or three days the boy was desperate. His manhood was in a trap. He thought of a dozen plans for breaking free, but whichever way he turned the steel jaws seemed to close on him. What could he do? He was not strong and ruthless like his father, or he might have broken his way out; he was not clever like Richard, or he might have contrived it. Money, money—that was what lay at the bottom of his helplessness. Even if he had a very little he could take Bessie away and marry her, and then they could both find work together on a farm. But he had not a penny. He tried to borrow some of Pete, but Pete showed him his empty pockets:

"If you'd asked me after the Fair, lad, I might have been able to let you have a shillun or two. But this time o' year, I'm as poor as you are."

Meantime Bessie knew nothing of the darkness in her lover's life. She was working away sturdily and patiently at Eggs Hole, looking forward to meeting him

on practice night, and going with him to the Fair a week later.

Saturday came, the day which had always been Robert's Sabbath, with a glimpse into Paradise. He toiled miserably with the horses, Reuben's stern eye upon him, while hatred rose and bubbled in his heart. What right had his father to treat him so ?—to make a prisoner and a slave of him ? He vowed to himself he would break free ; but how ?—how ? . . . A chink of pence in Reuben's pocket seemed like a mocking answer.

In the evening the taskmaster disappeared, to gloat over his wheatfields. Robert knew he would not be back till supper-time ; only Albert was working with him in the stable, and he felt that he could persuade his brother to hold his tongue if he disappeared for an hour or two.

" I want to go into Peasmarsh," he said to Albert ; " if Fäather comes and asks where I am, you can always tell him I've gone over to Grandturzel about that colt, can't you now ? "

" Reckon I can," said Albert good-naturedly, knowing that some day he might want his brother to do the same for him.

So Robert put on his Sunday coat as usual and tramped away to the village. The only drawback was that from the high wheatfield Reuben distinctly saw him go.

He reached the clerk's house a little while after the practice had started, and stood for a moment gazing in at the window. A terrible homesickness rose in his heart. Must he really be cut off from all these delights ? There they stood, the boys and girls, his friends, singing " Disposer Supreme " till the rafters rang. Perhaps after to-night he would never sing with them again. Then his eyes fell on Bessie, and the hunger drove him in.

He took his place beside her, but he could not fix his mind on what they sang. In the intervals between the

anthems he was able to pour out instalments of his tragedy. Bessie was very brave, she lifted her eyes to his, and would not let them falter, but he felt her little coarse fingers trembling in his hand.

"I döan't know what I'm to do, my dear," he mumbled; "I think the best thing 'ud be fur me to git work on a farm somewheres away from here, and then maybe in time I cud put a liddle bit of money by, and you cud join me."

"Oh, döan't leave me, Robert."

For the first time the courage dimmed in her eyes.

"Wot else am I to do?" he exclaimed wretchedly; "'täun't even as if I cud go on seeing you here. Oh, Bessie! I can't even täake you to the Fair on Thursday!"

"Wot does a liddle thing lik that count when it's all so miserable?"

"Disposer Supreme,
And judge of the earth,
Who choosest for thine
The weak and the poor . . ."

The anthem crashed gaily into their sorrow, and grasping the hymn-sheet they sang together.

"Wöan't you be never coming here no more?" whispered Bessie in the next pause.

"Depends on if my fäather catches me or not."

He drank in the heat and stuffiness of the little room as a man might drink water in a desert, not knowing when the next well should be. He loved it, even to the smoke-stains on the sagging rafters, to the faint smell of onions that pervaded it all.

"All honour and praise,
Dominion and might,
To God, Three in One,
Eternally be,
Who round us hath shed
His own marvellous light,
And called us from darkness
His glory to see."

Young Ralph Bardon had come into the room, and stood by the door while the last verse was being sung. He was there to give an invitation from his father, for every year the Squire provided the choristers with a mild debauch at Flightshot. Robert had been to several of these, and they glittered in his memory—the laughter and games, the merry fooling, the grand supper table gay with candles. What a joke it had been when someone had given the salt to Rosie Hubble instead of the sugar to eat with her apple pie, and when some other wag had pulled away Ern Ticehurst's chair from under him. . . .

" Thank you, sir—thank you kindly."

The invitation had been given, and the choristers were crowding towards the door. Robert followed them mechanically. It was raining hard.

" Oh, dear, oh, dear," said Bessie, " I never brought my cloak."

" You must put on my coat."

He began taking it off when he heard someone beside them say :

" I have a great-coat here."

Robert turned round and faced Bardon, whose eyes rested approvingly on the gleaming froth of Bessie's hair.

" I'm driving home in my gig with a rug and hood," continued the young man, " so I've no need of a great-coat as well."

Robert opened his mouth to refuse. He was offended by the way the Squire looked at Bessie. But on second thoughts he realised that this was no reason for depriving her of a wrap ; his own coat was too short to be much good. After all he could see that the acquaintance went no further.

Bessie had, however, already taken the matter out of his hands by saying—" Thank you kindly, sir."

" You see, this is my very best gown," she confided

to Robert outside the house, " and I döan't know wot I shud do if anything happened to it."

" Well, you're not to täake that coat back to Flightshot yourself. Give it to me when we come to Eggs Hole, and I'll see that he has it."

" Very well, dear," she answered meekly.

They did not speak much on that walk home. Their minds seemed dank and washed out as the night. Their wet fingers gripped and twined . . . what was the use of speaking? Everything seemed hopeless—no way to turn, no plans to make, no friends to look to.

It was quite dark when they reached Eggs Hole, and parted after kisses no longer as shy as they used to be.

On arriving at Odiam, Robert was seized by his father and flogged within an inch of his life.

§ 12.

Reuben thought that he had efficiently broken his son's rebellion. All the next day Robert seemed utterly cowed. He was worn out by the misery of the last few hours, and by the blows which in the end had dulled all the sore activities of mind and soul into one huge physical ache. Reuben left him alone most of the day, smiling grimly to himself when he saw him. Robert spent several hours lying on the hay in the Oast barn, his mind as inert and bruised as his body. He had ceased to contrive or conjecture, even to dread.

Towards evening, however, a new alarm stirred him a little. He remembered Bardon's coat, which he had brought back with him to Odiam. If he did not take it over to Flightshot, the young Squire might call for it at Eggs Hole. Robert was most anxious that he should not meet Bessie again; he could not forget the admiration in his eyes, and was consumed with fear and jealousy lest he should try to take his treasure from him, or frighten or hurt her in any way. It is true that Bardon had a blameless record, and also a most shy and

fastidious disposition, but Robert was no psychologist. And if anyone had said that the Squire's gaze had merely been one of tolerant approval of a healthy country-wench, and that he would not have taken the peerless Bessie as a gift, and rather pitied the man who could see anything to love in that bursting figure and broad yokelish face—then Robert would not only have disbelieved him, but fought him into the bargain.

So he managed with an effort to pull himself together and walk a couple of miles across the fields to the Manor. He was climbing the gate by Chapel Barn when something fell out of the pocket of the coat. Unluckily it fell on the far side of the gate, and Robert with many groans and curses forced his stiff body over again, as the object was a smart shagreen pocket-book, evidently of some value. It had dropped open in its fall, and as he picked it up, a bank-note fluttered out and eddied to the grass. It was a note for ten pounds, and Robert scowled as he replaced it in the pocket-book.

It was a hemmed shame—life was crooked and unfair, in spite of the Disposer Supreme and Judge of the Earth. For the first time he doubted the general providence of things. Why should young Bardon with his easy manners and roving lustful eye have a pocket full of money to spend as he pleased, whereas he, Robert, who loved truly and wanted to marry his love, should not have a penny towards his desires? This was the first question he had ever asked of life, and its effect was to upset not only the little store of maxims and truisms which made his philosophy, but those rules of conduct which depended on them. One did not take what did not belong to one because in church the Curate said, "Thou shalt not steal," whereat the choristers would sing, "Lord have mercy upon us, and incline our hearts to keep this law." Nevertheless, that bank-note spent the last mile of the way in Robert's pocket.

The act was not really so revolutionary as might at

first appear, for up to the very steps of the Manor he kept on telling himself that he would put it back. But somehow he did not do so—when he handed the coat to the man-servant the pocket-book was still in his stable-smelling corduroys.

Well, he had taken it now—it was too late to give it back. Besides, why should he not have it? Those ten pounds probably did not mean much to the Squire, but they meant all things to him and Bessie. He could marry her now. He could take her away, find work on some distant farm, and comfortably set up house. The possibilities of ten pounds were unlimited—at all events they could give him all he asked of life.

In the middle of the night he woke up feeling quite differently. A sick and guilty horror overwhelmed him. He must have been delirious the day before, light-headed with pain and misery. Now he saw clearly what he had done. He was a thief. He had committed a terrible sin—broken one of the Ten Commandments. He might be caught and put in prison, anyhow, the God who said, "Thou shalt not" would punish him and perhaps Bessie too. The sweat poured down Robert's forehead and off his cheeks. The future seemed to be closing in upon him with iron walls. He trembled, cowered, and would have said, "Our Father" if he dared. Oh God, why had he done this dreadful thing?

Luckily his body was so tired that even his kicking mind could not keep it awake. Suddenly, in the midst of all his remorse and terror, he fell asleep, and did not wake till sunshine two hours old was on his pillow.

When he woke, the nightmare had passed. Instead, he saw things as he had seen them yesterday. He could marry Bessie—and he must do so quickly, seize his chance for fear it should slip from him again. This time he must not muddle things. Above all he must avoid coming into conflict with his father—he was more afraid of Reuben than of all the police in Sussex.

§ 13.

All that day he expected to hear that the theft had been discovered. The Squire would be sure to remember his pocket-book and where he had put it. However, time passed and nothing happened. It was possible that young Bardon had not yet found out his loss. But Robert felt sure that when, sooner or later, the money was missed, it would be traced to him. He must act quickly. Oh Lord! how he hated having to act quickly! It was now a race between him and fate—and Fate must have smiled. . . .

First of all he had to see Bessie. He could not send her a letter, for she could not read. He must somehow manage to go over to Eggs Hole. He would not tell her how he had come by the ten pounds. A pang went into his heart like a thorn as he realised this, but he felt that if she knew she might refuse to go away with him. He would marry her first, and confess to her afterwards. Perhaps some day they might be able to return the money—meantime he would say that a friend had lent it to him. The thought of this, his first lie to her, hurt him more than the actual theft.

He managed to slip over to Eggs Hole that evening. Albert, whom his father had not treated gently on the day of the choir practice, refused to be his accomplice a second time, but Reuben, thinking his rebellion crushed, kept a less strict watch over him, and took himself off after supper to the Cocks, where he had weighty matters of politics and agriculture to discuss. Robert seized his opportunity, and ran the whole way to Eggs Hole—laid his plans before Bessie—and ran the whole way back again.

Bessie was as surprised as she was delighted to hear that he should suddenly have found a friend to lend him ten pounds—" a feller called Tim Harman, lives

over at Rolvenden," said Robert in a perspiring effort to be convincing. However, it never struck her to doubt his word, and she put down to emotion and hard running all that seemed strange in her sweetheart's manner.

Bessie was quicker and more practical than Robert, and between them they evolved a fairly respectable scheme. Next Thursday was Fair Day, and all the Backfield family, including Robert, would be at the Fair. She would meet him in Meridiana the gipsy's tent at five—it was right on the outskirts of the Fair, and they could enter separately without attracting attention, on the pretext of having their fortunes told. Then they could easily steal off under cover of dusk. They would go to Wadhurst, where there were many farms—get work together, and marry at once. Meantime Robert was to divert suspicion by his blameless conduct, and find out as well as he could exactly what one did to get married.

On arriving home he was uncertain as to whether it would be more diplomatic to go straight to bed or let his father on his return from the Cocks find him industriously working at the corn accounts. He decided on the latter, and was soon with many groans and lickings of his pencil crediting and debiting Odiam's wheat.

Backfield came in about nine, by which time Robert's panting had completely subsided and his complexion lost the beetroot shade which might have betrayed his exertions. His father was in a good temper, and overflowed with the Cocks' gossip—how Realf had got twenty-five pounds for his heifer at Battle, how the mustard had mixed in with Ticehurst's beans and spoilt his crop, how Dunk of Old Turk said he would vote Radical at the next election, and how young Squire Bardon had been robbed of his pocket-book, with certificates for three hundred pounds of Canadian stock and a ten-pound bank-note in it.

Robert bit off the end of his pencil, which his father,

who was looking the other way, luckily did not see. The boy crouched over the fire, trying to hide his trembling, and longing yet not daring to ask a hundred questions. He was glad and at the same time sorry when Reuben having explained to him the right and the wrong way of sowing beans, and enlarged on the wickedness of Radicals in general and Gladstone in particular, returned to Bardon's loss.

"Of course he äun't sure as it wur stolen—he may have dropped it. But policeman döan't think that's likely."

"Then policeman's bin töald about it?" came faintly from Robert.

"Surelye! I wur spikking to him over at the Cocks. I said to him as I wur sartain as one of those lousy Workman's Institute lads of his had done it. That's wot comes of trying to help labourers and cowmen and such—there's naun lik helping the poor fur putting them above themselves, and in these times when everyone's fur giving 'em votes and eddicating them free, why——" and Reuben launched into politics again.

That night was another Hell. Robert lay wakeful in a rigor of despair. It was all over now. The constable would be at Odiam the first thing next morning. Bardon was bound to remember that his pocket-book was in the coat he had lent Bessie. He might even think that Bessie had taken it! This fresh horror nearly sent Robert out of the window and over the fields to the Manor to confess his crime. But he was kept back by the glimmerings of hope which, like a summer lightning, played fitfully over his mental landscape. He dared not stake everything. Perhaps after all young Bardon could not remember where he had put the pocket-book; he must have forgotten where it was when he offered the coat to Bessie, and it was possible that he would not remember till the lovers had escaped—after which he might remember as much as he liked. for Robert never

thought for a moment that he could be traced once he had left Peasmarsh.

As a matter of fact his simplicity had done much for him in this matter. A man with a readier cunning would have taken out the money and restored the pocket-book exactly as he had found it. Robert had blunderingly grabbed the whole thing—and to that he owed his safety. If Bardon had found the pocket-book in his great-coat, he would at once have reconstructed the whole incident. As things were, he scarcely remembered lending the coat to Bessie, and it had certainly never occurred to him that his pocket-book was in it. Being rather a careless and absent-minded young man, he had no recollection of putting it there after some discussion with Sir Miles about his certificates. He generally kept it in his drawer, and thought that it must have been taken out of that.

So no constable called at Odiam the next morning, and at breakfast the whole Backfield family discussed the Squire's loss, with the general tag of "serve him right!"

The following day was market-day at Rye, and Robert and Peter were to take over the cart. Robert was glad of this, for he had made up his mind that he must change the bank-note. If he tried to change it at the Fair or after he had gone away with Bessie it might arouse suspicion; but no one would think anything of his father having so large a sum, and he could offer it when he went to pay the harness bill at the saddler's. As for the pocket-book, he threw that into the horse-pond when no one was looking; it was best out of the way, and the three hundred pounds' worth of certificates it contained meant nothing to him.

Fate, having thus generously given him a start, continued to encourage him in the race he was running against her. On the way to Rye he fell in with Bertie Ditch. Bertie was going to marry a girl up at Bright-

ling, and Robert found that there was nothing easier than to discuss with him the ways and means of marriage. From his ravings on his marriage in particular precious information with regard to marriage in general could be extracted. Oh, yes, he had heard of fellows who got married by licence, but banns were more genteel, and he didn't doubt but that a marriage by banns was altogether a better and more religious sort. He and Nellie, etc., etc. . . . Oh, he didn't think a licence cost much—two or three pounds, and an ordinary wedding by banns would cost quite as much as that, when one had paid for the choir and the ringers and the breakfast. Now he and Nellie . . . oh, of course, if you were in a hurry—yes; but anyhow he thought one of the parties must live a week or so in the parish where the marriage was to take place.

Robert, after some considering, decided to go with Bessie to Wadhurst, and ask the clergyman there exactly what they ought to do. He could easily find a room for her where she could stay till the law had been complied with. They would travel by the new railway. It would be rather alarming, but Jenny Vennal had once been to Brighton by train and said that the only thing against it was the dirt.

So gradually the difficult future was being settled. When they came to Rye Robert left Peter to unpack the cart and went to pay the harness bill at the saddler's. Reuben had given him five pounds, but he handed over the terrible bank-note, which was accepted without comment.

Fate still allowed him to run ahead.

§ 14.

Thursday broke clear and windy—little curls of cloud flew high against spreads of watery blue, and the wind raced over Boarzell, smelling of wet furrows. As usual

everyone at Odiam was going to the Fair—even Mrs. Backfield, for Reuben said that he would not let the girls go without her. Caro and Tilly were now fifteen and sixteen, and their father began to have fears lest they should marry and leave him. Tilly especially, with her creamy complexion like Naomi's, and her little tip-tilted nose, freckled over the bridge, gave him anxious times. He sternly discouraged any of the neighbouring farmers' sons who seemed inclined to call; he was not going to lose his daughters just when Mrs. Backfield's poor health made them indispensable. It could not be long before his mother died—already her bouts of rheumatism were so severe that she was practically crippled each winter—and when she died Tilly and Caro must take her place.

Robert had not slept at all that night. Already sleeplessness, excitement, and anxiety had put their mark on him, giving a certain waxiness to his complexion and dullness to his eyes; but this morning he had curled and oiled his hair and put on his best clothes, which diverted the family attention, and in some way accounted for his altered looks. Everyone at the breakfast-table wore Sunday-best, except Beatup, who was to mind the farm in the morning, Richard taking his place in the afternoon.

Peter's strong frame and broad shoulders were shown off in all their glory by his tight blue coat—he was spoiling for the fight, every now and then clenching his fists under the table, and dreaming of smart cuts and irresistible bashes. Albert thought of the pretty girls he would dance with, and the one he would choose to lead away into the rustling solitude of Boarzell when his father was not looking . . . to lie where the gorse flowers would scatter on their faces, and her dress smell of the dead heather as he clasped her to him. Richard was inclined to sneer at these rustic flings, and to regret the westward pastures where Greek syntax and Anne

Bardon exalted life. Jemmy and George thought of nothing but the swings and merry-go-rounds; Tilly and Caro did not think at all, but wondered. Reuben watched their big eyes, so different from the boys', Tilly's very blue, Caro's very brown, and felt relieved when he looked from them to their grandmother, sitting stiffly in a patched survival of the widow's dress, her knotted hands before her on the table, at once too indifferent and too devoted to pity the questing youth of these two girls.

Reuben himself, in his grey cloth suit, starched shirt, and spotted tie, was perhaps the most striking of the company. Albert, the only one who had more than a vague appreciation of his father's looks, realised how utterly he had beaten his sons in their young men's game before cracked mirrors, showing up completely the failure of their waistcoats, ties, and hair oils in comparison with his. As was usual on festive occasions, his hair was sleeked out of its accustomed roughness, lying in blue-black masses of extraordinary shininess and thickness on his temples; his tight-fitting trousers displayed his splendid legs, and when he spoke he showed finer teeth than any of the youngsters. Albert scowled as he admired, for he knew that no girl would take him if she had a chance of his father.

Next to Reuben sat Harry—the other man whom Boarzell had made. He slouched forward over his plate, in terror lest the food which dropped continually out of his mouth should fall on the tablecloth, and he should be scolded. He looked at least ten years older than Reuben, for his face was covered with wrinkles, and there were streaks of grey in his hair. As he sat and ate he muttered to himself. No one took any notice of him, for the children had been brought up to look upon Uncle Harry as a sort of animal, to whom one must be kind, but with whom it was impossible to hold any rational conversation. Tilly was the most attentive to him, and

would cut up his food and sometimes even put it in his mouth.

After breakfast the whole family set out for the Moor. Odiam looked unnatural with its empty yard, where the discouraged Beatup mouched, gazing longingly and chewing a straw. But every farm round Boarzell looked the same, for Boarzell Fair emptied the neighbourhood as completely as a pilgrimage would empty a Breton hamlet—only the beasts and unwilling house-keepers were left behind.

Though it was not yet ten o'clock the Fair was crowded. A shout greeted Harry's appearance with his fiddle, for it was never too early to dance. Blind Harry climbed on his tub, flourished his bow with many horrible smiles—for he loved his treats of popularity and attention—and started the new tune " My Decided Decision," which Caro and Tilly had taught him the day before. Albert immediately caught a pretty girl by the waist, and spun round with her on the grass while Pete vanished into the sparring-booth, his shoulders already out of his coat. Mrs. Backfield led off Caro and Tilly, looking sidelong at the dancers, to the more staid entertainment of the stalls. Jemmy and George ran straight to the merry-go-round, which now worked by steam, and hooted shrilly as it swung. Robert and Richard stood with their arms folded, watching the dancing with very different expressions on their faces.

At last Robert decided to lead out Emily Ditch, thinking that it might lull his father's suspicions if he had any. As a matter of fact the son Reuben watched most closely was Albert. He looked upon Robert's affair as settled, for the present at any rate, and credited him—perhaps rightly—with so poor a cunning that an occasional glance would serve; whereas Albert's oiled hair, stiff shirt-front, and clean white handkerchief roused all his fears and carefulness together.

After the dance, which did not last long, as poor Robert trod so heavily on his partner's feet that she soon begged him to stop, they strolled off round the Fair. Robert thought that if he made it a custom to roam among the booths his father would not notice his final disappearance so quickly. Lord! he was getting a hemmed crafty fellow. All the boys were allowed a shilling or two to spend at the Fair, so Robert treated Emily to a ride on the merry-go-round and five sea-sick minutes in the swings. Then he took Mrs. Button—Realf's married daughter, who had come over from Hove, to see the Panorama and a new attraction in the shape of a fat lady, which struck him as disgusting, but made her laugh tremendously.

He clung to Mrs. Button for most of the morning and afternoon, for he felt that she drove away suspicion, and at the same time had not the disadvantage of Emily Ditch, who had once or twice alarmed him by affectionately squeezing his hand. He did not take her to the fighting booth, as public opinion had shut that to ladies during the years that had passed since Reuben had sat with Naomi in the heat and sawdust—but she stood behind him in the shooting gallery, whilst he impartially scored bulls in the mouths of Disraeli, Gladstone, and the Emperor of France.

"Let's go and dance now," she said as he pocketed his bag of nuts.

Robert wondered anxiously what time it was; already a faint blear of red was creeping into the cold, twinkling afternoon. The moon rose at a quarter to five—when he saw it come up into the sky out of Iden Wood he must go to Meridiana's tent. He led Mrs. Button to where the dancers jigged to Harry's unending tune. Reuben stood on the outskirts, among the spectators, watching with a stern eye Albert snatch kisses off a Winchelsea girl's brown neck as he swung her round. Luckily for Robert his brother was behaving

outrageously—his misdeeds were as usual flagrant; just at that moment he pulled down his partner's hair, and they whirled about together, laughing in the coarse mesh that blinded them both. Reuben's mouth was a hard, straight line, and his eyes like steel. He scarcely noticed Robert and Mrs. Button hopping about together, and he did not see when half an hour later the boy stole away alone.

Robert felt warm and glowing—he had enjoyed that dance, and wished he could have danced with Bessie. Perhaps he would dance with her some day. . . . Behind him, the creak of Harry's fiddle sounded plaintively, with every now and then a hoot from the merry-go-round. The dusk was falling quickly. Yellow flares sprang up from the stalls, casting a strange web of light and darkness over the Fair. Gideon Teazel looked like some carved Colossus as he stood by the roundabout, his great beard glowing on his breast like flames . . . behind, in the smeeth of twilight, with the wriggling flare of the lamps, the lump of dancers did not seem to dance, but to writhe like some monster on the green, sending out tentacles, shooting up spines, emitting strange grunts and squalls—and at the back of it all the jig, jig, jig of Harry's tune.

Further on, in the secrecy of the tents and caravans, the dusk became full of cowering shapes, sometimes slipping and sliding about apart, sometimes blotted together . . . there were whispers, rustlings, strugglings, low cries of "döan't" and "adone do!"—the sound of kisses . . . kisses . . . they followed Robert all the way to Meridiana's tent, where, standing in the brazier glow, and flushed besides with crimson of her own, stood Bessie.

Their eyes met over the flames; then Robert remembered the need for keeping up appearances, and said he wanted his fortune told. He could scarcely wait while Meridiana muttered about a fair young lady and

a heap of money coming to him in a year or two. Bessie slipped round the brazier and stood beside him, their hands impudently locked, each finger of the boy's clinging round a finger of the girl's.

Meridiana's low sing-song continued :

" It's a gorgeous time I see before you, dear ; riches and a carriage and servants in livery, and a beautiful wife decked over with jewels and gold as bright as her hair—success and a fair name, honour and a ripe old age—and remember the poor gipsy woman, won't you, darling ? "

But he had already forgotten her. He stood with his arm round Bessie, stooping under the canvas roof, half choking in the brazier reek, while his lips came closer and closer to her face . . .

" Hir me duval ! " said Meridiana to herself, " but they've forgotten the poor person's child."

She saw them go out of the tent, still linked and in their dream, then watched their dark shapes stoop against the sky.

They clung together panting and trembling, for she was really his at last, and he was hers. Before them lay the darkness, but they would go into it hand in hand. She was his, and he was hers.

At last they dropped their arms and stood apart. The dusk was full of rustlings, flittings, scuttlings, kisses . . .

" God bless you, gorgeous lady and gentleman," cried Meridiana shrilly from the tent—" the dukkerin dukk tells me that you shall always wear satin and velvet, and have honour wherever you go."

Then suddenly a heavy hand fell on Robert's shoulder, and a voice said :

" Robert Backfield, I arrest you on the charge of stealing a pocket-book containing bonds and money from Squire Ralph Bardon of Flightshot."

§ 15.

With many tears, and the help of the kindly farmer's daughter at Eggs Hole, who acted as penwoman, Bessie wrote a letter to Robert in the Battery gaol:

"You must not think, my dearest lad, that anything what you have done can separate you and me. We belong to each other as it seems, and what you have done I forgive as you would if I had done it. I shall always be yours, Robby, no matter how long you are in prison, I shall be waiting, and thinking of you always. And I forgive you for not telling me you had taken the money, but that a friend had lent it to you, because you thought I would not have gone away with you, but I would have, surely. Be brave and do not fret. I wish it was all over, but we must not fret.

"From your loving

"Bessie."

The proceedings before the Rye magistrates had been brief, and ended in Robert's committal for trial at Quarter Sessions. He had made no attempt to deny his guilt—it would have been useless. He was almost dumb in the dock, for his soul was struck with wonder at the cruel circumstances which had betrayed him.

He had been tracked by the number on the note—it was the first time he realised that notes had numbers. This particular note had been given by Sir Miles Bardon to his son as a part of his quarterly allowance, and though Ralph was far too unpractical to notice the number himself, his father had a habit of marking such things, and had written it down.

The saddler at Rye had not heard of the theft when young Backfield handed over the note in payment of the harness bill. He had at the time remarked to his wife

that old Ben seemed pretty flush with his money, but had thought no more of it till the matter was cried by the Town Crier that evening, after Robert and Pete had gone home. Then out of mere curiosity he had looked at the number on his note, and found it was the same as the Crier had announced. Early the next day he went to the Police Station, and as young Bardon now remembered lending his coat to Robert Backfield it was fairly easy to guess how the theft had been committed.

The Squire regretted the matter profoundly, but it was too late now not to proceed with it, so he made it a hundred times worse by writing an apologetic letter to Reuben, and asking the magistrate to deal gently with the offender. Robert's pathetic story, and the tearful evidence of his sweetheart, gave him at once all the public sympathy ; the blame was divided pretty equally between the Bardons and Backfield.

Richard bitterly abused his father to Anne, as they met in the midst of the strife of their two families :

" It's always the same, he keeps us under, and makes our lives a misery till we do something mad. He's only got himself to thank for this. We're all the slaves of his tedious farm——"

" I should rather say ' abominable,' " Anne interrupted gently.

" His abominable farm—he gets every bit of work out of us he can, till we're justabout desperate——"

" Till we're absolutely desperate."

" And he expects us to care for nothing but his vulgar ambitions. Oh Lord ! I wish I was out of it ! "

" Perhaps you will be out of it some day."

He shrugged.

" How should I get free ? "

" Perhaps a friend might help you."

He looked into her face, then suddenly crimsoned—then paled, to flush again :

" Oh, ma'am, ma'am—if ever you cud help me get

free—if ever . . . oh, I—I'd sarve you all my life—I'd——"

"Hush," she said gently—"that's still in the future—and remember not to say 'sarve.'"

The Quarter Sessions were held early in December, and Robert's case came wedged between the too hopeful finances of a journeyman butcher and the woes of a farmer from Guldeford who had tried to drown himself and his little boy off the Midrips. Robert was sentenced to three years' imprisonment.

There was nothing remarkable about the trial, and nothing to be said against the sentence from the point of either justice or humanity. Ten years ago the boy would have been transported to Van Diemen's Land. The Bardons took it upon themselves to be outrageously sorry, and were rather mystified by Reuben's contemptuous attitude towards them and their regrets.

The evidence had been merely a repetition of that which had been given before the magistrate, though Bessie did not cry this time in the witness-box, and Robert in the dock was not dumb—on the contrary, he tried to explain to the Recorder what it felt like to have absolutely no money of one's own.

Reuben was present at the trial, and sitting erect, in his good town clothes, drew the public glance away both from the prisoner and the Recorder. Feeling was against him, and when in his summing-up Mr. Reeve remarked on the strangeness of a young man of Backfield's age having no money and being compelled to work without wages, a low murmur went round the court, which Reuben did not seem to hear. He sat very stiffly while the sentence was pronounced, and afterwards refused to see his son before he was taken away to Lewes.

"Poor feller, this 'ull be the breaking of him," said Vennal outside the Court-house.

"No more'n he deserves. He's a hard man," said Ditch.

"Thinks only of his farm and nothing of his flesh and blood," said old Realf.

"It sarves un right," said Ginner.

So it was throughout the crowd. Some said "poor man," others muttered "his own fault." But all words, either of pity or blame, were silenced when Backfield came out of the Court-house and walked through the people, his head high, his step firm, his back straight.

§ 16.

The next few weeks were for Reuben full of bitter, secret humiliation. He might show a proud face and a straight back to the world, but his heart was full of miserable madness. It was not so much his son's disgrace that afflicted him as the attitude of people towards it—the Bardons with their regrets and apologies, the small fry with their wonder and cheap blame. What filled him with rage and disgust beyond all else was the thought that some people imagined that Robert had disgraced Odiam—as if a fool like Robert, with his tinpot misdoings, had it in his power to disgrace a farm like Odiam! This idea maddened him at times, and he went to absurd lengths to show men how little he cared. Yet everywhere he seemed to see pity leering out of eyes, he seemed to see lips inaudibly forming the words: "poor fellow"—"what a blow for his schemes!"—"how about the farm?—now he'll lie low for a bit."

This was all the worse to bear, as now, for the first time, he began seriously to dread a rival. The only farm in the district which could compete with Odiam was Grandturzel, but that had been held back by the indifference of its owner, old Realf. Early in the March of '65 old Realf died, and was succeeded by his son, Henry Realf, whom rumour spoke of as a promising and

ambitious young man. Skill and ambition could do even more with Grandturzel than they could with Odiam, for the former had the freehold of forty acres of Boarzell. Reuben had always counted on being able to buy these some day from old Realf, but now he expected his son to cling to them. There would be two farms fighting for Boarzell, and Grandturzel would have the start.

All the more reason, therefore, that Odiam should stand high in men's respect. Now, of all times, Reuben could not afford to be looked upon with contempt or pity. He must show everyone how little he cared about his family disgrace, and do everything he could to bring himself more prominently into the social and agricultural life of the district.

For the first time since his father's death he gave suppers at Odiam; once more he spent money on French wines which nobody wanted to drink, and worked his mother and daughters to tears making puddings and pies. He bought a new gig—a smart turnout, with a sleek, well-bred horse between the shafts—and he refused to let Harry fiddle any more at Fairs and weddings; it was prestige rather than profit that he wanted now.

In May people began to talk of a general election; the death of Palmerston and the defeat of Gladstone's Reform Bill made it inevitable. Early in June Parliament was dissolved, and Rye electors were confronted with the postered virtues and vices of Captain MacKinnon (Radical) and Colonel MacDonald (Conservative).

Reuben had not hitherto had much truck with politics. He had played the part of a convinced and conscientious Tory, both at home and in the public-house; and every evening his daughter Tilly had read him the paper, as Naomi had used to do. But he had never done more at an election than record his vote, he had never openly identified himself with the political

life of the district. Now it struck him that if he took a prominent part in this election it would do much to show his indifference to the recent catastrophe, besides giving him a certain standing as a politician, and thus bestowing glory and dignity on Odiam.

The local Tories would be glad enough of his support, for he was important, if not popular, in the neighbourhood, and had always been known as a man who took an intelligent interest in his country's affairs.

Not that Rye elections had ever been much concerned with national events. Borough had always been a bigger word than country on those occasions. It was the question of the Harbour rather than the Ballot which had sent up Captain Curteis in 1832, while later contests had centred round the navigation of the Brede River, the new Sluice at Scott's Float, or the Landgate clock. Reuben, however, cared little for these petty town affairs. His chief concern was the restoration of the tax on wheat, and he also favoured the taxing of imported malt and hops. He hated and dreaded Gladstone's "free breakfast table," which he felt would mean the ruin of agriculture in England. He would like to concentrate country Toryism into an organised opposition of Free Trade, and his wounded pride found balm in the thought of founding a local agricultural party of which he would be the inspirer and head.

§ 17.

Reuben began to attend the Tory candidate's meetings. Colonel MacDonald was not a local man, any more than Captain MacKinnon, but he had some property in the neighbourhood, down on the marsh by Becket's House. Like the other candidate, he had spent the last month or so in posting himself in local affairs, and came to Rye prepared, as he said, "to fight the election on herrings and sprats."

However, at his first meeting, held at Guldeford Barn, he was surprised to find a strong agricultural element in the audience. He was questioned on his attitude towards the wheat tax and towards the enfranchisement of six-pound householders. The fact was that for a fortnight previously Reuben had been working up public opinion in the Cocks, and also in the London Trader, the Rye tavern he used on market-days. He had managed to convince the two bars that their salvation lay in taxing wheat, malt, and hops, and in suppressing with a heavy hand those upstarts whom Radical sentimentalists wanted at all costs to educate and enfranchise.

Reuben could speak convincingly, and his extraordinary agricultural success gave weight to his words. If not liked, he was admired and envied. He was "a fellow who knew what he was doing," and could be trusted in important matters of welfare. In a word, he achieved his object and made himself head of an Agricultural Party, large enough to be of importance to either candidate.

It was not long before he had overtures from Captain MacKinnon. The Captain had expected an easy triumph; never since it became a free borough had Rye sent a Tory to Parliament. Now he was surprised and a little alarmed to see signs of definite Tory enterprise, banded under one of the most important and successful farmers in the district. It is true that he had the Bardons on his side, but the Bardons were too gentlemanly to be useful. He would have given much to corrupt Reuben, but Flightshot, which held the only bribe that could have made him so much as turn his head, insisted on keeping pure. He tried to hold his own by appealing to the fishermen and sailors against the agriculturists—but as these in the past had made little fortunes by smuggling grain, they joined the farmers in demanding a wheat-tax.

He then turned to the small householders and shopkeepers, dazzling them with visions of Gladstone's free breakfast table—he even invited the more prominent ones to an untaxed breakfast in the Town Hall ; whereat the Colonel, at Reuben's instigation, retaliated with a sumptuous dinner, which he said would be within the reach of every farmer when a moderate wheat-tax no longer forced him to undersell his harvests.

Rye platforms, instead of being confined to arguments on herrings and sprats, rang unusually with matters of national import. The free education of the poor was then a vital question, which Reuben and his party opposed with all their might. Educated labourers meant higher wages and a loss of that submissive temper which resulted in so many hours' ill-paid work. Here the Bardons waxed eloquent, but Backfield, helped by Ditch of Totease, who could speak quite well if put through his paces beforehand, drew such a picture of the ruin which would attend an educated democracy, that the voice of Flightshot, always too carefully modulated to be effective, was silenced.

As usual the local printing-presses worked hard over pamphlets and posters, and as a Rye election was nothing if not personal, Reuben was soon enlightened as to the Radical opinion of him. Posters of a startlingly intimate and insulting nature began to appear about the town ; a few were displayed in Peasmarsh, and some were actually found on the walls of his own barns.

" Bribed, stolen, or strayed, an Ugly Gorilla, answering to the name of Ben. The animal may be distinguished by his filthy habits, associates frequently with swine and like hogs, delights in rolling in manure, and is often to be found in Ditches. Is remarkable for his unnatural cruelty towards his own young, whom he treats with shocking unkindness. The animal has likewise a propensity for boasting and lies. The Gorilla's

temper is dreadfully bad, horribly vicious, and fearfully vindictive. A reward of Five Pounds will be given by Jothan True Blue, chairman of the Poor Man's Big Loaf Association, to any Blue Lamb who may find this Odious Creature, as his one object while at large is to steal the Poor Man's Loaf. He would also take, if he could, the Poor Man's Vote, and confine the Poor Man's Children to the dirt and ignorance in which he himself wallows, being unable to read or write, and was once heard to ask the Cringing Colonel, his keeper, what was the meaning of 'Tory Principle and Purity' on his election banners. We too would like to know."

Reuben tore the posters down whenever he found them, but this kind of attack did not humiliate him as the old pitying curiosity had done. He was not lowered in his own esteem. On the contrary, he enjoyed the fame which Radical hate conferred on him. There was no doubt about Odiam's importance now.

The Tories were not to be beaten in invective, and posted Rye with enquiries after the Rabid Hybrid or Crazy Captain:

"The habits of this loathsome creature are so revolting that all who have beheld them turn from them in horror and disgust. It is afflicted with a dirty disease called Gladstone Fever, and in its delirium barks horribly 'Educate! Educate!'"

Much more was written in this strain on both sides, and Colonel MacDonald hired a band of youths to parade the streets singing:

"Conservatives, 'tis all serene—
MacDonald for ever! Long live the Queen!"

or:

"The people of Rye now they all seem to say
That MacDonald's the man who will carry the sway,
Triumphant he'll drive old MacKinnon away—
For MacDonald's the man for the people!"

Reuben did not care much for these doings; they were, he thought, a mere appeal to scum, and he preferred to give his mind to weightier things. He organised meetings in the furthest hamlets of the district, and managed to stir up the interest of the farmers to such a pitch that it soon looked as if the Tory candidate would carry all before him. MacKinnon could not open his mouth on the platform without shouts of: "Wheat at seventy shillings a quarter!" or "What's the use of a big loaf if we've got no money to buy it with?"

The Radicals began to quake for their victory. Speakers were sent for from London, but could not even get a hearing, owing to the enemy's supplies of bad eggs. Meetings were everywhere broken up in disorder, and the Captain was reported to have said that the Liberal party ought to offer a knighthood to anyone who would poison Backfield's beer.

§ 18.

So time passed till within a week of polling day. The feeling in the district grew more and more tense—no prominent member of either party could appear in Rye streets without being insulted by somebody on the opposite side. Meetings were orgies of abuse and violence, but whereas the Radical meetings were invariably broken up in disorder by their opponents, interruptions at Tory meetings resulted only in the interrupters themselves being kicked out. For the first time it looked as if a Conservative would be returned for Rye, and the Colonel knew he owed his success to Backfield's agricultural party.

Then suddenly the unexpected happened. At the end of one of Reuben's most successful meetings in Iden Schoolhouse, a mild sandy-haired person, whom nobody knew, rose up and asked meekly whether it was true that the Scott's Float toll-gate was on Colonel Mac-

Donald's estate, and if so, what use did he make of the tolls? He was answered by being flung into the street, but afterwards the Conservative tenant of Loose Farm on the Marsh remarked to Reuben that it was "a hemmed ark'ard question."

Reuben, however, absorbed by his enthusiasm for Protection and a restricted franchise, scarcely thought twice about the toll-gate, till the next day a huge poster appeared all over the district:

"MACDONALD'S GATE"

"Sing ye who will of Love, or War, or Wine,
Of mantling Cups, Bright Eyes, or deeds of Might—
A theme unsung by other harps is mine—
I sing a Gate—a novel subject quite.

O Tolls! ye do afflict us all—a bore!
E'en when by Law imposed on evil slight!
Who has not loaded ye with curses sore
When in this Coat of Proof enveloped tight?

Therefore to what is Law I say 'content'—
But for a Private Man to raise a toll,
To stop the public, tax them, circumvent,
Moves me to passion I can scarce control,
Makes boil the rushing blood and thrills my very soul."

Hitherto any verse that had been written in the controversy had been meant for street singing, and turned out in the less serious moments of politicians who certainly were not poets. But "MacDonald's Gate" impressed the multitude as something altogether different. The sounding periods and the number of capitals proclaimed it poetry of the very highest order, and its prominent position throughout the town soon resulted in the collection of excited groups all discussing the Scott's Float toll-gate, which nobody hitherto had thought much about.

The Tories were a little disconcerted—the toll-gate did not fit into their campaign. Tolls had always been unpopular in the neighbourhood, even though Government-

owned, and it was catastrophic that the enemy should suddenly have swooped down on the Colonel's private venture and rhymed it so effectively.

Of course a counter-attack was made, but it had the drawback of being made in prose, none of the Tory pamphleteers feeling equal to meeting the enemy on his own ground. Also there was not very much to be said, as it was impossible to deny the Scott's Float toll-gate. So the writers confined themselves to sneering at the Radical poet's versification, and hinting that Captain MacKinnon had done many worse things than own a toll-gate, and that all the money the Colonel had from his went to the upkeep of his land, a statement which deceived nobody.

The next day a fresh poster appeared, printed this time in flaming red letters :

" If you'd know what the Colonel is, pray travel over
The Sluice at Scott's Float—and then drive on to Dover—
You'll find yourself quickly brought up by a Gate
Where a Toll they will charge at no moderate rate.

Oh why is a Gate stuck across at this Spot ?
Is the Colonel so poor or so grasping—or what ?
'Tis that he may gain some more hundreds this way in,
To swell out the purse where his Thousands are laying.

Awake, oh, for shame, ye electors of Rye !
Let the banner of freedom float gaily on high,
Throw your bonds to the winds, ye Electors—for know
That he who'd be free must himself strike the Blow."

Thenceforward the whole character of the election was changed. The Poor Man's Loaf was forgotten as completely as the wheat-tax which should make the farmer rich. Six-pound householders became as uninteresting as anybody else who had not a vote. Nobody cared a damn whether the poor were educated at the nation's expense or not. The conflict raged blindly, furiously, degradingly round the Scott's Float toll-gate.

No one thought or spoke or wrote of anything else.

If at meetings Reuben tried to introduce Protection or the Franchise, he was silenced even by his own party. The Scott's Float toll-gate became as important as the Sluice or the Brede River or the Landgate Clock had been in other elections, and nothing, no matter of what national importance, could stand against it.

Reuben cursed the base trucksters who had brought it forward, and he cursed the scummy versifier who was its laureate—whose verses appeared daily on six-foot hoardings, and were sung by drunken Radicals to drown his speeches. No one knew who the Radical poet was, for his party kept him a mystery, fearful, no doubt, lest he should be bribed by the other side. Some said that he was a London journalist, sent down in despair by the Liberals at head-quarters. If so they must have congratulated themselves on their forlorn hope, for the tide of events changed completely.

The worst of that toll-gate was that the Conservatives could never explain it away. They printed posters, they printed handbills, they attempted verse, they made speeches, they protested their disinterestedness, they even tried to represent the abomination as a philanthropic concern, but all their efforts failed. They quickly began to lose ground. It was the Conservative instead of the Liberal meetings that were broken up in disorder. Colonel MacDonald was howled down, and Reuben came home every evening his clothes spattered with rotten eggs.

§ 19.

Polling day broke gloomily on Rye Tories. The country voters were brought into town at the Candidates' expense, having received according to custom printed notices that the Colonel, or the Captain, "would endeavour to ensure to every elector access to the poll free from every sort of insult."

In Rye bells were ringing and bands were playing,

and the town looked quite strange with huge crowds surging through its grass-grown streets, which were, moreover, blocked with every kind of trap, gig, cart, and wain. About three hundred special constables had been enrolled for the occasion, and it was likely that they would be needed, for all the public-houses had been thrown open by the candidates.

In the market-place, where the hustings stood, a dense throng was packing itself, jostling and shoving, and—Reuben saw to his dismay as he drove up to the London Trader—showing strong Radical tendencies. Several Conservative banners waved from the windows of the public-house—"MacDonald the Farmer's Friend"—"MacDonald and Protection"—"Wheat at seventy shillings a quarter"—"Ratepayers! beware of Radical pickpockets." These had all been prepared at the beginning of the contest. The Radical banners bore but one device—"The Scott's Float Toll-gate." It waved everywhere, and any other banner which appeared in the streets was immediately seized and broken, the bearer being made to suffer so horribly for his convictions, that soon nobody could be found to carry one.

Every now and then the crowd would break into the latest rhymings of MacKinnon's poet:

> "Who fill their pockets at Scott's Float,
> And on their private Toll-gate doat,
> While o'er our hard-earned pence they gloat?
> The Tories."

Reuben felt his heart sink, and his beer nearly choked him. Soon a vast struggle was raging round the hustings, as the voters fought their way through fists and sticks, often emerging—especially the Conservatives—with their clothes half torn off their backs and quite ruined by garbage. The special constables were useless, for their own feelings betrayed them, and unluckily even in their ranks the Radicals predominated. The

state of the poll at ten-thirty was twenty-seven for Captain MacKinnon and only eleven for Colonel MacDonald.

Speeches were made from time to time, but were lost in the general hubbub. One of the local butchers had delivered over his entire stock of entrails, skin and hoof cuttings, and old blood-puddings to the Radical cause, and Conservative speakers were soon a sight to behold. When Reuben stood up his voice was drowned in shouts of "Ben the Gorilla! Stop the dirty animal!" while a bleeding sheep's head caught him full on the chest. Too proud to take his dismissal from the mob, he spoke unheard for five minutes, at the end of which he was silenced by half a brick, which hit his temple and stunned him sufficiently for Ditch and MacDonald to pull him away.

At twelve the poll stood at a hundred and one for the Captain and sixty-five for the Colonel. The Tories were getting desperate—they threw into the crowd handbills wet from the printers, declaring that MacDonald's toll-gate should not stand an hour after he was elected. But the crowd only sang derisively:

> "Who fill their pockets at Scott's Float,
> And on their private Toll-gate doat,
> While o'er our hard-earned pence they gloat?
> The Tories."

At three o'clock the poll stood at two hundred and twelve and eighty-three. Then came the close—Captain MacKinnon elected by a majority of sixty-nine.

Loud cheers rose up from the struggling, drunken mass in the market-place.

"Hurray for MacKinnon!—Down with the Toll-keepers!"

In the Court-house the beaten Conservatives heard the shouts and turned fiercely—on one another.

"It's that hemmed gëate of yourn—lost everything!" cried Reuben.

"By God, it's not my gate—it's your wheat."

"My wheat!—wot d'you mean, sir?"

"I mean that, thanks to you, we wasted about three weeks talking to those damned fools about a matter they don't care twopence about. You worked up a false interest, and the result is, that when anything that really touches them is brought forward, the whole campaign drops to pieces."

"It's unaccountable easy to put the blame on me, when it's your hemmed gëate——"

"I tell you, sir, it's your damned wheat——"

"And your damned son!" furiously cried Ditch of Totease.

"My son!"—Reuben swung round on the men who had once rallied under his leadership, but now stood scowling at him and muttering to themselves. "My son!"

"Yes," said Coalbran of Doozes, "you know as well as us as how it wur your Albert wrote them verses about the gëate, wot have bust up everything."

"You're a liar!" cried Reuben.

"You dare miscall me," and the two men, mad with private hate and public humiliation, flew at each other's throats.

Ditch and the Colonel pulled them apart.

"Hang it all, Coalbran, we don't know it's his son. But we do know it's his wheat. Good God, sir—if only you'd kept your confounded self out of politics——"

Reuben did not wait to hear more. He pushed his way out of the room and downstairs to where his trap was waiting. The crowd surged round him as he climbed into it. An egg burst against his ear, and the filthy yolk ran down his cheek to mingle with the spatter of blood on his neck and shirt-front.

"Ben the Gorilla! Ben the Gorilla! Give him tar and feathers!"

Reuben struck his horse with the whip, and the

animal sprang forward. A man who had been trying to climb into the gig, fell off, and was nearly trampled on. Reuben flogged his way through the pack, a shower of missiles hurtling round him, while his ears burned with the abuse which had once been his badge of pride, but now in the hour of defeat smote him with a sick sense of impotence and degradation. "Ben the Gorilla! Ben the Gorilla!"

He was free of them at last, galloping down the Landgate hill towards Rye Foreign.

"I'm hemmed," he muttered, grinding his teeth, "if I ever touch their dirty politics again—from this day forward—so help me God!"

§ 20.

On reaching Odiam, Reuben did not go into the kitchen where his children were gathered, expectant and curious. He went straight upstairs. Caro, who caught a glimpse of him in the passage, ran away in terror—he looked so dreadful, his face all dabbled with blood and yolk of egg.

He went up to Albert's room. He had furiously given Ditch the lie in the Courthouse, but he had never trusted his son, and the accusation had poured over him a flood of shame which could be quelled only by its proof or its refutation. If Albert's guilt were proved—which Reuben, now bathing in this luminous shame, saw was quite probable—then he knew what to do to clean the smirch off Odiam; if, on the other hand, his innocence were established, then he would punish those swine who threw mud at him and his farm.

Albert slept in one of the attics with Jemmy and Pete. Reuben had no intention of meeting him till he had something to confront him with, for he was pretty sure that the boy would lie to him. He began turning the room topsy-turvy, and had soon found in a drawer a

heap of papers scrawled over with writing. It was unlucky that he could not read, for he could not even tell whether the handwriting were Albert's—these might be some letters he had received. Suddenly, however, a word caught his eye which he had seen a hundred times on hoardings, letters, bills, and other documents—MacKinnon. He could trace it out quite clearly. What had Albert to do with MacKinnon? Reuben clenched the papers together in his fist, and went downstairs to the kitchen.

Albert was not there. All the better! Reuben strode up to Tilly, unaware of how terrible he looked with the traces of his battle not yet washed from his face, and banged the papers down in front of her.

"Wot's all this?"

Tilly was frightened.

"It's—it's only poetry, fäather."

"Read me some of it."

"It's only Albert's."

"That's why I want to hear wot it's about. You read it."

Tilly began to read in a faltering voice:

"If you'd know what the Colonel is, pray travel over
The Sluice at Scott's Float—and then drive on to Dover—
You'll find yourself quickly brought up by a Gate . . ."

Reuben struck his fist on the table, and she dropped the paper with a little cry.

"It's true, then! Oh Lard! it's true!"

"Wot, fäather?"

"Them's Albert's verses right enough?"

"Yes, fäather, but——"

"Fetch him here."

Tilly was more frightened than ever. She had never heard anything about the great Gate controversy, and could not understand why Reuben was so angry with Albert. The verses seemed to her quite harmless, they

were not even about love. However, she could not disobey her father, so she ran and fetched Albert out of the corn-chamber, begging him to be careful what he said, "fur fäather's unaccountable vrothered to-night about something."

"How did the Election go?"

"I never asked."

"Oh, you gals! Well, I expect that's wot's the matter. The Liberal's got in."

"But why should that mäake fäather angry wud you?"

Albert stuck out his chest and looked important, as he invariably did before an encounter with Reuben, in spite of the fact that these always ended most ingloriously as far as he was concerned.

"He's bin reading some poetry of yours, Bertie," continued his sister, "and he's justabout dreadful, all his clöathes tore about, and a nasty mess of blood and yaller stuff on his face."

Albert suddenly began to look uneasy.

"Oh Lard! perhaps I'd better bolt fur it.—No, I'll square him out. You'll stand by me, Tilly?"

"Yes, but döan't mäake him angry—he might beat you."

Bertie's pride was wounded by this suggestion, which was, however, soundly based on precedent, and he entered the kitchen with something very like a swagger.

Reuben was standing by the table, erect, and somehow dignified in spite of the mess he was in.

"Well," he said slowly, "well—MacKinnon's hound!"

Albert saw the heap of scribbled paper on the table, and blenched.

Reuben walked up to him, took him by the shoulders, and shook him as a dog might shake a rabbit.

"You hemmed, scummy, lousy Radical!"

Albert could not speak, for he felt as if his brains and teeth were rattling about inside his head. The rest of

the family hunched together by the door, the boys gaping idiotically, the girls in tears.

"Well, wot've you got to say fur yourself before I kick you round the table?"

"I'll write wot I please, surelye," growled Albert, trying rather unsuccessfully to resume his swagger.

"Oh, will you! Well, there'll be naun to prevent you when you're out of this house—and out you go to-night; I'll have no Radical hogs on my farm. I'm shut of you!"

"Fäather!" cried Tilly.

"Hold your tongue! Does anyone here think I'm going to have a Radical fur my son?—and a tedious lying traitor, too, wot helps his fäather's enemies, and busts up the purtiest election that wur ever fought at Rye. Do you say you didn't write those lousy verses wot have lost us everything?"

"No—I döan't say it. I did write 'em. But it's all your fault that I did—so you've no right to miscall me."

"My fault!"—Reuben's jaw dropped as he faced the upstart.

"Yes. You've allus treated me lik a dog, and laughed at my writing and all I wanted to do. Then chaps came along as didn't laugh, and promised me all sorts o' things if I'd write fur them."

"Wot sort o' things?"

"Mr. Hedges, the Liberal agent, promised that if I'd write fur him, he'd git me work on a London paper, and I could mäake my fortune and be free of all this."

"All wot?"

"Odiam!" shrieked Albert.

Reuben faced him with straight lips and dilated nostrils; the boy was now quivering with passion, hatred seemed to have purged him of terror.

"Yes—Odiam!" he continued, clenching his fists—"that blasted farm of yourn wot's the curse of us all. Here we're made to work, and never given a penny fur

our labour—we're treated worse than the lowest farm-hands, like dogs, we are. Robert stole money to git away, and can you wonder that when I see my chance I should täake it. I'm no Radical—I döan't care one way or t'other—but when the Radicals offered me money to write verses fur 'em, I wurn't going to say 'no.' They promised to mäake my fortun, and save me from you and your old farm, which I wish was in hell."

"Stop your ranting and tell me how the hogs got you."

"I met Mr. Hedges at the pub——"

"Wur it you or him wot thought of the Scott's Float Gëate?"

"I heard of it from old Pitcher down at Loose, and I töald Hedges. I justabout——"

A terrific blow from Reuben cut him short.

§ 21.

The rest of the family had gone to bed, though scarcely to sleep. Reuben had washed the blood and filth off his face, and had stripped to his shirt, but he felt too sick and restless to lie down. He sat at his window, staring out into the dark gulf of the night.

His skin burned, his pulses throbbed, in his head was a buzzing and humming.

"Wished my farm wur in hell, dud he? He cursed my farm, dud he? The young whelp!"

He peered out into the blackness. Was that something he saw moving against the sky on the shoulder of Boarzell? It was too dark for him to make sure. Where had Albert gone? To his Radical friends, of course. They had offered to make his fortune—well, let them make it, and durn them!

Two sons were gone now. Life was hitting him hard. But he would have no traitors in his camp. Albert was his son no longer.

He bowed his head on the sill, and his throbbing brain

revisualised the whole horrible day. He owed the humiliation and defeat of it all to Albert, who for the sake of money and a milk-and-water career, had betrayed Odiam's glory, and foully smirched its name.

There was no denying it—he had been basely dealt with by his elder children. Robert was in prison, Albert existed no longer except in the memory of a bitter disgrace, Richard was contemptuous, and, his father suspected, up to nothing good. . . . And he had looked to them all to stand and fight by his side, to feel his ambition, and share his conquest. Pete was a good lad, but what was one where there should have been four? He could not deny it—his elder children had failed him.

Something almost like a sob shook Reuben. Then, ashamed of his weakness, he raised his head, and saw that behind Boarzell the night had lifted, and a cowslip paleness was creeping into the sky. The great dark hump of the Moor showed clearly against it with its tuft of firs. A faint thrill stole through Reuben's tired limbs. Boarzell was always there to be loved and fought for, even if he had no heart or arm but his own. Gradually hope stirred as the dawn crept among the clouds. The wind came rustling and whiffling to him over the heather, bringing him the rich damp smell of the earth he loved.

Oh, Boarzell, Boarzell! . . . his love, his dream, his promised land, lying there in the cold white hope of morning! No degenerate sons could rob him of his Moor, though they might leave him terribly alone on it. After all, better be alone with his ambition, than share it with their defiling thoughts, their sordid, humdrum, milk-and-water schemes. In future he would try no more to interest his children in Boarzell. He had tried to thrill Robert and Albert and Richard with his glorious enterprise, and they had all forsaken him—one for love, one for fame, and one for some still unknown unworthiness. He would not trouble about the others;

they should serve him for no other reason but that he was a hard master. He had been hard with the three boys, but he had been exciting and confiding too. Now he would drop all that. He would cease to look for comradeship in his children, as years ago he had ceased to look for it in his wife. It would be enough if they were just slaves working under his whip. He had been a fool to expect sympathy. . . . Boarzell, looming blacker and blacker against the glowing pinks and purples of the sky, seemed to mock at sympathy and its cheap colours, seemed to bid him Be Hard, Be Strong, Be Remorseless—Be Alone.

BOOK IV

TREACHERIES

§ 1.

REUBEN'S domestic catastrophes might be summed up in the statement that he had lost two farm hands. It is true that Albert had never been much good—if he had his father would probably not have turned him away—but he had been better than nothing, and now Reuben would have to hire a substitute. One would be enough, for Jemmy and George were now able to do a man's full work each. So another hand was engaged for Odiam—Piper, a melancholy, lean-jowled cowman from Moor's Cottage.

The family was forbidden to speak of the absent sons. No one ever wrote to Robert in Lewes gaol or to Albert living on London's cruel tender-mercies. The shame of them was to be starved by silence. Soon most of the children had forgotten them, and they lived solely in Tilly's unhappy thoughts or Richard's angry ones, or in certain bitter memories of their father's, sternly fought.

Reuben had learnt his first lesson from experience. Quietly but decidedly he altered his conduct. He no longer made the slightest appeal to his family's enterprise or ambition, he no longer interrupted his chidings with those pathetic calls to their enthusiasm which had mystified or irritated them in times past. On the other hand he was twice as hard, twice as fierce, twice as ruthless and masterful as he had ever been.

Old Mrs. Backfield was getting very decrepit. She could not walk without a stick, and her knotted hands were of little use either in the kitchen or the dairy. Reuben was anxious to avoid engaging anyone to help her, yet the developments of her sphere made such help most necessary. Odiam now supplied most of the neighbouring gentry with milk, butter, and eggs; the poultry-yard had grown enormously since it had been a mere by-way of Mrs. Backfield's labours, and she and the girls also had charge of the young calves and pigs, which needed constant attention, and meant a great deal of hard work. Besides this, there was all the housework to do, sweeping, dusting, cooking, baking, and mending and washing for the males.

It occurred to Reuben that Harry might be of some use to the women. Since he had given up fiddling he was entirely on the wrong side of Odiam's accounts; it would do much to justify his existence if he could help a little in the house and thus save engaging extra labour.

Unfortunately Harry's ideas of work were fantastic, and he was, besides, hindered by his blindness. Any use he could be put to was more than balanced by the number of things he broke. His madness had of late developed both a terrible and an irritating side. He was sometimes consumed by the idea that the house was burning, and had on one or two occasions scared the family by jumping out of bed in the middle of the night and running about the passages shouting—"The house is afire! the house is afire! Oh, God save us all!" After he had done this once or twice, young Piper was made to sleep in his room, but even so he was often visited by his terrors during the day, and would interrupt work or meals with shrieks of—"The house is afire! Oh, wot shall we do! The house is afire, and the children are burning."

Another habit of his, less alarming, but far more annoying, was to repeat some chance word or sentence

over and over again for hours. If his mother said "Take these plates into the kitchen, Harry," he would spend the rest of the day murmuring, "Take these plates into the kitchen, Harry," till those about him were driven nearly as mad as he.

It was soon found that he hindered rather than helped the work, so Reuben had to cast about for fresh plans. He felt utterly ruthless now, and was resolved to make his daughters manage the house alone. He redistributed the labour, and by handing over the poultry, calves, and pigs to Beatup, and taking some of his work upon his own shoulders, made it physically possible for Caro and Tilly to run the house and dairy with the feeble help of old Mrs. Backfield. He told them that he could not afford to engage a woman, and that they must do without her—making no appeal to their interest or ambition as he might have done six months ago.

Caro and Tilly did not rebel. Somehow or other their young backs did not break under the load of household toil, nor, more strangely, did their young hearts, in the loneliness of their hard, uncared-for lives.

Tilly was now nearly eighteen. She had always been like her mother, but as she grew older the likeness became more and more pronounced, till sometimes it seemed to Reuben as if it were Naomi herself with her milky skin and fleeting rose-bloom who sat at his table and moved about his house. The only difference lay in a certain prominence of the chin which gave her an air of decision that Naomi had lacked. Not that Tilly was ever anything but docile, but occasionally Reuben felt that some time or other she might take her stand—a fear which had never troubled him with Naomi.

Caro was not like her sister; she was of larger build, yet thinner, and much darker, inheriting her father's swarthy skin and thick black hair. She did not give Reuben the same anxiety as Tilly—she was heavy and coltish, and, he felt, would not appeal to men. But

Tilly, especially when the summer heats had melted together the little freckles over her nose, struck his masculine eye in a way that made him half proud, half fearful.

No young men ever visited Odiam. The young Ditches, the young Vennals, or Coalbrans, or Ginners, who had business to transact with Backfield, did so only at a safe distance. Reuben could not as yet afford to lose his housemaids. Some day, he told himself, he would see that the girls married to the honour of his farm, but at present he could not do without them.

They did not murmur, for they had known no different life. They had never, like other girls, wandered with bevies of young people through the lanes at dusk, or felt in the twilight a man's hand grope for theirs. They had not had suitors to visit them on Sundays, to sit very stiff and straight in the parlour, and pass decorous remarks about the weather all the while their eyes were eating up a little figure from toe to hair.

Nevertheless when they worked side by side in the kitchen or dairy, skimming milk, churning butter, watching puddings bubble and steam, or when they made Reuben's great bed together, they had queer, half-shy, half-intimate talks — in which their heads came very close and their voices sank very low, and an eavesdropper might have often caught the word " lover," uttered mysteriously and sometimes with an odd little sigh.

§ 2.

That spring the news flew round from inn to inn and farm to farm that Realf of Grandturzel had bought a shire stallion, and meant to start horse-breeding. This was a terrible shock to Reuben, for not only was horse-breeding extremely profitable to those who could afford it, but it conferred immeasurable honour. It seemed now as if Odiam were seriously threatened. If Realf

prospered at his business he could afford to fight Reuben for Boarzell.

As a man in love will sometimes see in every other man a plotter for his beloved, and would never believe it if he were told that he alone sees charm in her and that to others she is undesirable, so Reuben could not conceive ambition apart from the rugged, tough, unfruitful Boarzell, whom no man desired but he. He at once started negotiations for buying another twenty acres, though at present he could ill afford it, owing to the expenses involved by his family misfortunes and his new mania for prestige.

He watched Grandturzel's developments with a stern and anxious eye, and kept pace with them as well as he could. The farm consisted of about fifty-five acres of grass and tilth, apart from the forty acres of Boarzell, which neither Realf nor his father had ever attempted to cultivate, using them merely for fuel and timber, or as pasturage for the ewes when their lambs were taken from them. Old Realf had allowed the place to acquire a dilapidated rakish look, but his son at once began to smarten it up. He tarred the two oast-houses till they shone blue with the reflected sky, he painted his barn doors green, and re-roofed the Dutch Barn with scarlet tiles that could be seen all the way from Tiffenden Hill. He enriched his poultry-yard with a rare strain of Orpington, and was the only farmer in the district besides Reuben to do his reaping and hay-making by machinery.

Realf was about twenty-five, a tall, well-set-up young fellow, with certain elegancies about him. In business he was of a simple, open temperament, genuinely proud of his farm, and naïve enough to boast of its progress to Backfield himself.

Indeed he was so naïve that it was not till Reuben had once or twice sneered at him in public that he realised there was any friction between Grandturzel

and Odiam, and even then he scarcely grasped its importance, for one night at the Cocks, Coalbran said rather maliciously to Reuben:

"Which of your gals is it that young Realf is sweet on?"

"My gals! Neither of 'em. Wot d'you mean?"

"Only that he walks home wud them from church every Sunday, and föalkses are beginning to wonder which he's going to mäake Mrs. Realf, surelye!"

Reuben turned brick-red with indignation.

"Neither of my gals is going to be Mrs. Realf. I'd see her dead fust! And the fellers as spread about such ugly lying tales, I'll——" and Reuben scowled thunderously at Coalbran, whom he had never forgiven since the scene in Rye Court-house.

"He slanders my sons and he slanders my daughters," he muttered to himself as he went home, "and I reckon as this time it äun't true."

However, next Sunday he astonished his family by saying he would accompany them to church. Hitherto Reuben's churchmanship had been entirely political, he had hardly ever been inside Peasmarsh church since his marriage, except for the christenings of his children—though he considered himself one of the pillars of the Establishment. His family were exceedingly suspicious of this change of heart, and the girls whispered guiltily together. "He's found out," said Caro, and Tilly sighed.

There was much turning of heads when Ben Backfield was seen to take his place with his children in their pew. . . . "Wot's he arter now?"—"Summat to do wud his farm you may be sartain."—"He's heard about his gals and young Realf."—"Ho, the wicked old sinner! I wish as Passon 'ud tip it to un straight."

Realf of Grandturzel sat a little way ahead on the opposite side, and Reuben watched him all through the service. Times had changed since Robert had hurled

his big voice among the rafters with the village choir. The choir now sat in the chancel and wore surplices; the Parson too wore a surplice when he preached; for the Oxford Movement had spread to Peasmarsh, and Mr. Barnaby, the new clergyman, lived at the Rectory, instead of appointing a curate to do so, and unheard-of things happened in the way of week-day services and Holy Communion at eight o'clock in the morning. Reuben, however, scarcely noticed the changes, so absorbed was he in young Realf. Occasionally the boy would turn his head on his shoulder and rashly contemplate the Backfield pew. Reuben invariably met him with a stare and a scowl.

All through the sermon he sat with his eyes fixed on Realf's profile. There was his rival, the man with whom he would have to reckon most during the difficult future, with whom he was fighting for Boarzell. He looked marvellously young and comely as he sat there in the fretted light, and suddenly for the first time Reuben realised that he was not as young as he had been. He was forty-six—he was getting old.

Something thick and icy seemed to creep into his blood, and he gripped the edge of the pew, as he stared at Realf, sitting there so unconsciously, his damped and brushed hair gleaming ruddily in the light that poured through some saint's aureole. He must not let this youngster beat him. . . . Beat him?—the ice in his blood froze thicker—after all he had not done so very much during the twenty-six years he had toiled and struggled; he had won only a hundred acres of Boarzell—little more than Realf had to start with . . . and Realf was only twenty-five.

Caro and Tilly, sitting carefully so as not to crush their muslins, both their heads slewed round a little towards Realf, noticed how their father's throat was working, how hot flows of colour rushed up and ebbed away under the tan on his cheeks. For the first time

Reuben was contemplating failure, looking that livid horror full in the face, seeing himself beaten, after all his toil and heartache, by a younger man.

But the next moment he cast the coward feeling from him. His experience had given him immeasurable advantage over this babe. Realf who had never felt the sweat pouring like water down his tired body, who had never swooned asleep from sheer exhaustion, or lain awake all night from sheer anxiety, who had not sacrificed wife and children and friends and self to one dear, loved, darling ambition . . . bah ! what could he do against the man who had done all these things, and was prepared to go on doing them to the end ?

When the congregation rose to sing Reuben held his head proudly and his shoulders square. He felt himself a match for any youngster.

§ 3.

That summer old Mrs. Backfield became completely bedridden. The gratefulness of sunshine to her old bones was counteracted by the clammy fogs that streamed up every night round the farm. It was an exceptionally wet and misty summer—a great deal of Reuben's wheat rotted in the ground, and he scarcely took any notice when Tilly announced one morning that grandmother was too ill to come downstairs.

When the struggle on the lower slopes of Boarzell between the damp earth and the determined man had ended in the earth's sludgy victory and a pile of rotten straw which should have been the glory of the man—then Reuben had time to think of what was going on in the house. He sent for the doctor—not Dr. Espinette, but a Cockney successor who boiled his instruments and washed his hands in carbolic—and heard from him that Mrs. Backfield's existence was no longer justified. She could not expect to work again.

Reuben was grieved, but not so much grieved as if she had been cut down in her strength—for a long time she had been pretty useless on the farm. He handed her over to the nursing of the girls, though they were too busy to do more for her than the barest necessities. Now and then he went up himself and sat by her bed, restlessly cracking his fingers, and fretting to be out again at his work.

Sometimes Harry would sit by her. He had wandered in one day when she was feeling especially ill and lonely, and in her desperation she had begged him to stay. At all events he was someone—a human being, or very nearly so. He shuffled restlessly round and round the room, fingering her little ornaments and pictures, and muttering to himself, " Stay wud me, Harry."

He liked her room, for she had a dozen things he could finger and play with—little vases with flowers modelled over them, woolly mats, a velvet pincushion, and other survivals of her married life, all very dusty and faded now. Soon she began to find a strange comfort in having him there ; the uneasiness and vague repulsion with which he had filled her, died down, and she began to see in him something of the old Harry whom she had loved so much better than Reuben in days gone by.

As the summer wore on she grew steadily worse. She lay stiff and helpless through the long August days, watching the sunlight creep up the wall, slip along the ceiling, and then vanish into the pale, heat-washed sky that gleamed with it even after the stars had come. She did not fret much, or think much—she watched things. She watched the sunshine from its red kindling to its red scattering, she watched the moon slide across the window, and haunt the mirror after it had passed—or the sign of the Scales dangling in the black sky. Sometimes the things she looked at seemed to fade, and she would see a room in which she and her husband were sitting or a lane along which they were walking . . .

but just as she had begun to wonder whether she were not really still young and happy and married and this vision the fact and the sickness and loneliness the dream, then suddenly everything would pass away like smoke, and she would be back in her bed, watching the travelling sun, or the haunting moon, or the hanging stars.

In October a steam-thresher came to Odiam. The wheat had been bad, but there was still plenty of grain to thresh, and for a whole day the machine sobbed and sang under the farmhouse walls—" Urrr-um—Urrr-um —Urrr-um."

Mrs. Backfield lay listening to it. She felt very ill, but everyone was too busy to come to her—Reuben was out in the yard feeding his monster, while the boys gathered up and sacked what it vomited out ; Caro and Tilly were washing blankets. Harry had gone off on some trackless errand of his own.

The afternoon was very still and soft. It was full of the smell of apples—of apples warm and sunny on the trees, of apples fallen and rotting in the grass, of apples dry and stored in the loft. There were little apples on the walls of the house, and their skins were warm and bursting in the heat.

The thresher purred and panted under the window— " Urrr-um—Urrr-um." Now and then Reuben would call out sharply, " Now then ! mind them genuines— they're mixing wud the seconds ! " or " Kip them sacks closed, Beatup." But for most of the afternoon the stillness was broken only by the hum of the machine which sometimes almost seemed a part of it.

Mrs. Backfield according to her custom watched the sun. It bathed the floor at first, but gradually she saw the square of the window paint itself on the wall, and then slide slowly up towards the ceiling. Her eyes mechanically followed it ; then suddenly it blazed, filmed, flowed out into a wide spread of light, in the midst of which she saw the kitchen at Odiam as it used

to be, with painted fans on the chimney-piece and pots of flowers on the window-sill. Her husband sat by the fire, smoking his pipe, while Harry was helping her tidy her workbasket.

" There now ! " she said to him, " I knew as it really wur a dream."

" Wot ? " he asked her, and she, in her dream, felt a spasm of delight, for it was all happening so naturally—it must be true.

" About fäather being dead, and you being blind, and Ben having the farm."

" Of course it's a dream—fäather äun't dead, and I äun't blind, and Ben's picking nuts over at Pudding-cake."

" You couldn't spik to me lik this if it wur a dream, Harry—could you, dear ? "

He didn't answer—and then suddenly he turned on her and shouted :

" Sack your chaff, now—can't you sack your chaff ? "

" Harry ! Harry ! " she cried, and came to herself in the little sun-smouldering room, while outside Reuben stormed at his boys to " sack their chaff," and the machine purred and sang— " Urrr-um—Urrr-um."

A sudden terrible lucidity came to Mrs. Backfield.

" It's machines as he wants," she said to herself, " it's machines as he wants. . . ."

Then a gentle darkness stole upon her eyes, as her overworked machine of flesh and blood ran down and throbbed slowly into stillness and peace.

Outside the great fatigueless machine of steel and iron sang on—" Urrr-um—Urrr-um—Urrr-um."

§ 4.

The girls cried a great deal at their grandmother's death—she had never taken up enough room in the boys' lives for them to miss her much. As for Reuben,

though he had been fond of her, he could not sincerely regret her, since for the last few months she had, so to speak, been carried on entirely at a loss.

He needed every penny and every minute more desperately than ever, for Grandturzel ran Odiam closer and closer in the race. Realf now plainly saw how matters stood. As yet there was no open breach between him and Reuben—when one of them came into the public-house the other always waited a decent interval before clearing out—but if there was no open breach, there was open rivalry. All the neighbourhood knew of it, and many a bet was made.

The odds were generally on Reuben. It was felt that a certain unscrupulousness was necessary to the job, and in that Backfield had the advantage. "Young Realf wudn't hurt a fly," his champions had to acknowledge. Though the money was with Reuben, the sympathy was mostly with Realf, for the former's dealings had scarcely made him popular. He was a hard man to his customers, he never let them owe him for grain or roots or fodder; his farm-hands, when drunk, spoke of him as a monster, and a not very tender-hearted peasantry worked itself sentimental over his treatment of his children.

For some months the antagonism between Odiam and Grandturzel remained in this polite state, most of the fighting being done by their champions. The landlord of the Cocks grew quite tired of chucking out Odiamites and Grandturzelites who could not, like their leaders, confine their war to words. But it only wanted some cause, however trivial, to make the principals show their fists. The time that Reuben would stay in the bar after Realf had entered it grew shorter and shorter, and his pretexts for leaving more and more flimsy. Realf himself, though a genial, good-tempered young man, could not help resenting the scorn with which he was treated. He once told Ginner that Backfield was an uncivilised

brute, and Ginner took care to forward this remark to the proper quarter.

At last the gods, who are more open-handed than ungrateful people suppose, took pity on the rivals, and gave them something to fight about. The pretext was in itself trivial, but when the gunpowder is laid nothing bigger than a match is needed. This particular pretext was a barrow of roots which had been ordered from Kitchenhour by Reuben and sent by mistake to Grandturzel. Realf's shepherd, not seeing any cause for doubt, gave the roots as winter fodder to his ewes, and said nothing about them. When Reuben tramped over to Kitchenhour and asked furiously why his roots had never been sent, the mistake was discovered. He came home by Grandturzel, and found his precious roots, all thrown out on the fields, being nibbled by Realf's ewes.

Realf himself was away, but Reuben left such a stinging message for him, that apology was impossible except in a form that could only be regarded as a fresh insult. An apology in this shape reached Odiam at dinner-time, and Reuben at once sent off Beatup with an acceptance of it that was very nearly obscene. The result was that Realf himself arrived about three o'clock, furiously demanding an explanation of his neighbour's insulting conduct.

The two men met in the kitchen, Peter backing up his father, and for a long time the scene was stormy, the word " roots " whirling about the conversation, with the prefix " my good " or " your hemmed " as the case might be. Realf was genuinely angry—Reuben's attitude of mingled truculence and scorn had wounded even his easy pride.

" You're justabout afeard of me, that's wot you are. You think I'll bust up your old farm and show myself a better man than you. You're afeard of me because I'm a younger man than you."

" Ho, afeard of you, am I?—and because you're a

youngster? I'll justabout show you wot a youngster's worth. A better man, are you?—Put up your fists, and we'll see who's the better man."

Reuben began to take off his coat—young Realf drew back almost in disgust.

"I'm not going to fight a man old enough to be my father," he said, flushing.

"Ho, äun't you?—Come on, you puppy-dog, and see fur yourself if you need täake pity on my old age."

He had flung off his coat, and squared up to Realf, who, seeing no alternative, began to strip.

Peter interposed:

"Let me täake him on, fäather. I'll show him a thing or two."

Reuben turned on him savagely.

"Stand clear!—who wants your tricks? I'm going to show him wot a man's worth—a man wot's had his beard longer than this puppy's bin in the warld."

"But you're out of training."

"I'm in training enough to whip boys. Stand clear!"

Pete stood clear, as the two combatants closed. Neither knew much of the game. Realf had been born too late for boxing to have been considered a necessary part of his education, and Reuben had been taught in an old school—the school of Bendigo and Deaf Burke—mighty bashers, who put their confidence in their strength, despised finesse, and counted their victories in pints of blood.

He fairly beat down on Realf, who was lithe enough generally to avoid him, but not experienced enough to do so as often as he might. Every time Reuben struck him, the floor seemed to rush up to his eyes, and the walls to sag, and the house to fill with smoke. Pete danced round them silently, for while his sympathies were with his father his sporting instincts bade him keep outwardly impartial. He was disgusted with their footwork, indeed their whole style outraged his bruising

ideals ; but it pleased him to see how much Reuben was the better man.

They hardly ever clinched—on the other hand, there was much plunging and rushing. Reuben brought down Realf three times and Realf brought down Reuben once. It was noticeable that if the younger man fell more easily he also picked himself up more quickly. Between the rounds they leaned exhausted against the wall, Pete prowling about between them, longing to take his father on his knee, but still resolved to see fair play.

It was not likely that the fight would be a long one, for both combatants were already winded. Realf, moreover, was bleeding from the nose, and Reuben's left eye was swollen. Once he caught a hit flush on the mouth which cut his nether lip in two, and, owing to his bad foot-work, brought him down. But he was winning all the same.

For once that Realf managed to land a blow, Reuben landed a couple, and with twice as much weight behind them. The younger man soon began to look green and sick, he staggered about, and flipped, while the sweat poured off his forehead into his eyes. Reuben breathed stertorously and could scarcely see out of his left eye, but was otherwise game. Pete felt prouder of him than ever.

Suddenly Backfield's fist crashed into Realf's body, full on the mark. The wind rushed out of him as out of a bellows, and he doubled up like a screen. This time he made no effort to rise ; he lay motionless, one arm thrown out stiff and jointless as a bough, while a little blood-flecked foam oozed from between his teeth.

" You've done it ! " cried Pete.

Reuben had flopped down in a heap on the settle, and his son ran off for help. He flung open the door, and nearly fell over Tilly who was cowering behind it.

§ 5.

"Here—bring some water!" cried Peter, too much relieved to see her to be surprised at it.

Tilly flung one wide-eyed glance over her shoulder into the room where young Realf lay, and dashed off for water and towels, while Pete fetched a piece of raw meat out of the larder.

It was a minute or two before Realf opened his swollen, watering eyes, and gazed up bewildered into the face of the woman he had said his prayers to for a dozen Sundays. She held his head in the crook of her arm, and wiped the froth and blood from his lips.

"Better now?" asked Pete.

Realf suddenly seemed to shrink into himself. The next minute he was swaying unsteadily on his legs, refusing the hands held out to support him.

"I'm going home," he mumbled through his bruised lips.

"I'll täake you," said Pete cheerily.

But Realf of Grandturzel shook his head. His humiliation was more than he could bear. Without another look at Pete or Tilly, or at Reuben holding the raw chop to his eye, he turned and walked out of the room with bent head and dragging footsteps.

For a moment Pete looked as if he would follow him, but Reuben impatiently called him back.

"Leave the cub alone, can't you? Let him go and eat grass."

Tilly stood motionless in the middle of the room, her little nose wrinkled with horror at the bloodstains on the floor and at Reuben whose face was all bruised and swollen and shiny with the juice of the raw meat. Pete saw her shudder, and resented it.

"It wur a präaper fight," he declared. "You want to manage them feet of yourn a bit slicker, fäather—but you wur justabout smart wud your fists."

Tilly's blood ran thick with disgust ; she turned from them suddenly—that coarse, bloodthirsty, revolting pair—and ran quickly out of the room.

She ran out of the house. Away on Boarzell a man plodded and stumbled. She saw him stagger as the wind battered him, reel and nearly fall among the treacheries of the dead heather. He was like a drunken man, and she knew that he was drunk with shame.

All flushed with pity she realised the bitterness of his fate—he who was so young and strong and clean and gay, had been degraded, shamed by her father, whom in that moment she looked upon entirely as a brute. It must not be. He had been so good to her, so friendly and courteous in their Sunday walks—she must not let him go away from her shamed and beaten.

She gathered up her skirts and ran across the garden, out on to the Moor. She ran through the heather, stumbling in the knotted thickness. The spines tore her stockings, and in one clump she lost her shoe. But she did not wait. Her little chin was thrust forward in the obstinacy of her pursuit, and when she came closer to him she called—" Mr. Realf ! Mr. Realf ! "

He stopped and looked round, and the next minute she was at his side. Her hair was all blown about her face, her cheeks were flushed the colour of bell-heather, and her breast heaved like a wave. She could not speak, but her eyes were blessing him, and then suddenly both her hands were in his.

§ 6.

Early in the next year Sir Miles Bardon died, and his son Ralph became Squire. Reuben had now, as he put it, lived through three Bardons. He despised the enfeebled and effete race with its short life-times, and his own body became straighter when he thought of Sir Miles's under the earth.

For every reason now, Odiam was being forced on. Realf had sought comfort for his personal humiliation in making his farm more spick and span than ever. Reuben became aware of a certain untidiness about Odiam, and spent much on paint and tar—just as the frills of a younger rival might incite to extravagance a woman who had hitherto despised the fashions. He painted his waggons a beautiful blue, and his oasts were even blacker and shinier than Grandturzel's. He had wooden horses to dance on their pointers, whereupon Realf put cocks on his.

The thought of Tilly did not check the young man in this beggar-my-neighbour, for he knew that her father's ambition meant her slavery. So when Reuben added a prize Jersey heifer to his stock, Realf bought a Newlands champion milker, and when Reuben launched desperately on a hay-rope twister, Realf ran him up with a wurzel-cutter. Finally Reuben bought twenty acres of Boarzell, in which Realf did not attempt to rival him, for he already had forty which he did not know what to do with. Reuben's strugglings with Boarzell struck him as pathetic rather than splendid, an aberration of ambition which would finally spoil the main scheme.

So Realf's answer took the form of an extra cowman, whereupon Reuben hired a couple of new hands, causing his family to leap secretly and silently for joy and to bless the man who by his rivalry had lightened their yoke. As a matter of fact, Reuben would have been forced to engage one man, anyhow; for the new piece of land had at once to be prepared for cultivation, and gave even more trouble than the pieces which had already been cultivated but showed a distressing proneness to relapse into savagery. The lower slope of Boarzell was now covered with fields, where corn grew, as the neighbours said, "if one wur careful not to spik too loud," and the ewes could pasture safely if their shepherd were

watchful. But it somehow seemed as if all these things were only on sufferance, and that directly Reuben rested his tired arm Boarzell would snatch them back to itself, to be its own for ever.

Reuben swaggered a little about his new farm-hands, especially as Realf showed no signs of going any further in hirelings. One man, Boorman, came from Shoyswell near Ticehurst, and was said to be an authority on the diseases of roots, while the other, Handshut, came from Cheat Land on the western borders of Peasmarsh. Reuben went over to get his "character" from Jury the tenant—and that was how he met Alice Jury.

§ 7.

The door was opened to him by a tall young woman in a grey dress covered by an apron. Reuben was struck by that apron, for it was not the sacking kind to which he was accustomed, or the plain white muslin which his women-folk wore on Sundays, but a coarse brick-coloured cotton, hanging from her shoulders like a pinafore. The girl's face above it was not pretty, but exceptionally vivid—"vivid" was the word, not prominent in Reuben's vocabulary, which flashed into his mind when he saw her. Her colouring was pale, and her features were small and irregular, her hair was very frizzy and quite black, while her grey eyes were at once the narrowest and the liveliest he had ever seen.

"I'm sorry—father's not at home," she said in answer to his question.

"But I töald him as I wur coming over—it's about that Handshut."

She smiled.

"I'm afraid father forgets things. But come in, he's bound to be home to his dinner soon."

Reuben grumbled and muttered to himself as he crossed the threshold—small fry like these Jurys must

not be allowed to think that he had any time to spare. The young woman led him into the kitchen and offered him a seat. Reuben took it and crossed his legs, looking appraisingly round the room, which was poorly furnished, but beautifully kept, with some attempts at decoration. There was a print of Rossetti's " Annunciation " above the meal-chest, and a shelf of books by the fireplace. It all struck him as strange and rather contemptible. He remembered what he had been told about the Jurys, who had only just come to Cheat Land. Tom Jury had, so rumour said, kept a bookshop in Hastings, but trade had gone badly, and as his health demanded an outdoor life and country air, charitable friends had established him on a small holding. He had an invalid wife, and one daughter, who was not very strong either —an ignoble family.

The daughter must be the girl who was talking to him now. She sat on a little stool by the fire, and had brought out some sewing.

" You come from Odiam, don't you ? " she asked.

" Yes, that's it."

" Is Odiam that farm near Totease ? "

Reuben looked as if he had swallowed the poker. He stared at her to see if she were making fun of him, but her bright eyes were quite innocent.

" Yes," he said huskily—" it is."

" We've only been here a month, so I haven't got the neighbourhood quite clear. You see I can't often go out, as my mother's generally in bed, and I have all the house-work to do. That's why my father has to have a man to help him out of doors. It's a pity, for wages are so high—Handshut's leaving us because we could do with someone cheaper and less experienced."

Reuben liked her voice, with its town modulation, the only vestige of Sussex taint being a slight drawl. It struck him that Alice Jury was a " lady," and that he was not condescending very much in speaking to her.

" It's unaccountable hard to know what to do about labour. Now as these fellers are gitting eddicated they think no end of theirselves and 'ull ask justabout anything in wages—as if a man hoed turnups any better for being able to read and write."

" But don't you think he does ? "

" No—I döan't. I'm all agäunst teaching poor people anything and setting them above theirselves. It's different fur their betters. Now I've got six boys, and they can all read and write and cast accounts."

" Six boys, have you ? Are they grown up ? "

" Yes, the youngest's sixteen."

" And do they help you on the farm ? "

" Yes—leastways four of 'em do. Two have—have left home."

" I suppose they didn't care for farming ? "

" One's in prison, and t'other I turned away."

Reuben had no idea why he said this. It must have been the way her eyes were fixed on him, glowing above bistred shadows.

" Oh, indeed !—how sad."

He flushed the colour of her apron. What a fool he was !—and yet after all she would be bound to hear the truth sooner or later ; he had only been beforehand. All the same he was surprised at himself. A sudden tide of anger went over him.

" Sad fur them, I reckon, but not fur me. I'm well shut of them."

" Don't you miss them at all ? "

" Naun particular. Robert he wur good and ploddinglike, but you couldn't trust his stacking, and he'd be all nohow wud the horses—and Albert he'd shirk everything wotsumdever, he'd go off into dreams in the middle of killing a pig—surelye ! "

" But in themselves, I mean."

" Wot's that—in themselves ? "

" Well, as boys, as sons, not as farm-servants."

"I döan't never think of them that way. One's no good to me wudout t'other."

Alice Jury said nothing, and Reuben began to feel vaguely uncomfortable. What queer eyes she had!—they seemed to bore into him like nails. He suddenly rose to his feet.

"See here—I must be going."

"But father won't be long now."

"I'm sorry—I can't wait. I've a load of field-bean coming in. I'll be round agäun to-morrow."

"What time?—and I'll promise father shall be here to see you."

"About eleven, say. Good-bye, miss."

"Good-bye."

She went with him to the door. A great lump of phlox grew on either side of it. She stood between them, and suddenly pointed out over Jury's miserable little root-patch towards Boarzell, heaving its great hummocks against the east.

"What's that?" she asked.

§ 8.

Reuben came away from Cheat Land with odd feelings of annoyance, perplexity, and exhilaration. Alice Jury was queer, and she had insulted him, nevertheless those ten minutes spent with her had left him tingling all over with a strange excitement.

He could not account for it. Women had excited him before, but merely physically. He took it for granted that they had minds and souls like men, but he had not thought much about that aspect of them or allowed it to enter his calculations. Of late he had scarcely troubled about women at all, having something better to think of.

Now he found himself thrown into a kind of dazzle by Alice Jury. He could not explain it. Her personal

beauty was negligible—" a liddle stick of a thing," he called her ; their conversation had been limited almost entirely to her tactless questions and his forbearing answers.

" She äun't my sort," he mumbled as he walked home, " she äun't at all my sort. Dudn't know where Odiam wur—never heard of Boarzell—oh, yes, seems as she remembered hearing something when I töald her "—and Reuben's lip curled ironically.

He had not told her of his ambitions with regard to Boarzell, and now he found himself wishing that he had done so. He had been affronted by her ignorance, but as his indignation cooled he longed to confide in her. Why, he could not say, for unmistakably she " wasn't his sort " ; it was not likely that she would sympathise, and yet he wanted to pour all the treasures of his hope into her indifference. He had never felt like this towards anyone before.

He spent the day restlessly, and the next morning walked over to Cheat Land before half-past ten. Alice Jury opened the door, and looked surprised to see him.

" You said you were coming at eleven. I'm afraid father's out again."

" I wur passing this way, so thought I'd call in on the chance," said Reuben guiltily—" I döan't mind waiting."

She called a long-legged boy who was weeding among the turnips, and bade him go over to Puddingcake and fetch the master. Then she led the way to the kitchen, which smelled deliciously of baking bread.

" You don't mind if I go on with my baking ? I've twelve loaves in the oven."

" Oh, no," said Reuben, sitting in yesterday's chair, and gazing up at the Rossetti.

" Do you like pictures ? " asked Alice, thumping dough.

" Some," said Reuben, " but I like 'em coloured best."

"I paint a little myself," said Alice—"when I've time."

"Wot sort o' things do you paint?"

"Oh, landscapes mostly. That's mine"—and she pointed to a little water-colour sketch of a barn.

"Could you paint a picture of Odiam?"

"I expect I could—not really well, you know, just something like this."

"Could you paint Boarzell?"

He leaned towards her over the back of his chair.

"Yes, I dare say."

"Could you do it wud all the colours on it and all that?—all the pinks you git on it sometimes, and the lovely yaller the gorse mäakes?"

She was surprised at his enthusiasm. His eyes were kindling, and a blush was creeping under his sunburn.

"Oh, I could try! Do you want a picture of Boarzell?"

"I'd like one if you could really do it to look natural."

She smiled. "Perhaps I could. But why do you think so much of Boarzell?"

"Because I'm going to mäake it mine."

"Yours!"

"Yes—I mean to have the whole of it."

"But can you grow anything on a waste like that?"

"*I* can. I've got near a hundred acres sown already" . . . and then all the floodgates that had been shut for so long were burst, and the tides of his confidence rolled out to her, moaning—all the ache of his ambition which nobody would share.

Her eyes were fixed on him with their strange spell, and her sharp little face was grave. He knew that she did not sympathise—he had not expected it. But he was glad he had told her.

Her first words startled him.

"Do you think it's worth while?"

"Wot's worth while?"

"To give up so much for the sake of a piece of land."

Reuben gaped at her.

"I've no right to preach to you; but I think I may be allowed to ask you—'is it worth while?'"

He was too flabbergasted to be angry. The question had simply never come into his experience. Many a man had said, "Do you think you'll do it?" but no one had ever said, "Do you think it's worth while?"

Alice saw her blunder. She saw that she had insulted his ambition; and yet, though she now understood the ferocities of that ambition, it filled her with a definite hostility which made her want to fight and fight and fight it with all the strength she had. At the same time, as his surprise collapsed, his own antagonism rose up. He felt a sudden hatred, not for the girl, but for the forces which somehow he knew she was bringing to oppose him. They faced each other, their eyes bright with challenge, their breasts heaving with a stormier, earthlier emotion—and the white flame of antagonism which divided them seemed at the same time to fuse them, melt them into each other.

§ 9.

Reuben was going through a new experience. For the first time in his life he had fallen under the dominion of a personality. From his boyhood he had been enslaved by an idea, but people, in anything except their relation to that idea, had never influenced him. Now for the first time he had a life outside Boarzell, an interest, a set of thoughts, which were not only apart from Boarzell but antagonistic to it.

Hitherto he had always considered the opposite of his ambition to be the absence of it. Either one lived to subdue the hostile earth, or one lived with no object at all. It was a new experience to find someone whose life was full of hopes, ideals, and ambitions, all utterly

unconnected with a farm, and it was even more strange than new that he should care to talk about them. Not that he ever found himself being tempted from his own —the most vital part of his relations with Alice Jury lay in their warfare. He fought her as he fought Boarzell, though without that sense of a waiting treachery which tinctured his battles with the Moor; their intercourse was full of conflict, of fiery, sacred hostilities. They travelled on different roads, and knew that they could never walk together, yet each wanted to count the other's milestones.

Sometimes Reuben would ask himself if he was in love with her, but as the physical element which he had always and alone called love was absent, he came to the conclusion that he was not. If he had thought he loved her he would have avoided her, but there was no danger in this parliament of their minds. Her attitude towards life, though it obsessed him, no more convinced him than his convinced her. They would rail and wrangle together by the hour.

"Life is worth while," said Alice, "in itself, not because of what it gives you."

"I agree with you there," said Reuben, "it's not wot life gives that's good, it's wot you täake out of it."

"I don't see that. Suppose that because I liked that girl's face in the picture I tore it out and kept it for myself, I should only spoil the picture—the piece I'd torn out wouldn't be any good to me away from the rest."

"I can't foller you," said Reuben gruffly.

"Now don't pretend to be stupid—don't pretend you can't understand anything but turnips."

"And döan't pretend you can't understand naun but picturs. A good solid turnup in real life is worth a dozen pretty gals in picturs."

"That's right—have the courage of your earthiness. But don't try to make me think that when you look out

of the window at Boarzell, you don't see the sky beyond it."

"And döan't you try and make out as when you're looking at the sky you döan't see Boarzell standing in between."

"I don't try and make it out. I see your point of view, but it's only 'in between' me—and you—and something greater."

"Rubbidge!" said Reuben.

He always came away from these wrangles with a feeling as if he had been standing on his head. He was not used to mental scoutings and reconnoitrings. Also, he felt sometimes that Alice was laughing at him, which irritated him, not so much because she mocked as because he could never be really sure whether she mocked or not. Her laughter seemed to come from the remotest, most exalted part of her. The gulfs between their points of view never gaped so wide as when she laughed.

§ 10.

Reuben's constant visits to Cheat Land were soon noticed at Odiam, and every advantage was taken of them. A period of licence set in. Richard read Anne Bardon's Homer quite openly by the kitchen fire, Caro dropped tears over East Lynne in the dairy, and Jemmy spent long tarry hours at Rye, coming home with a rank chew in his mouth, and sailors' oaths to salt his work on the farm.

Tilly had private affairs of her own which occasionally led her out on Boarzell of an afternoon. She always took her sewing, for she dared not be behindhand with it. Strangely enough, in spite of Jemmy's and Tilly's truancies, the work was somehow got through as usual, for shortcomings would have been found out and punished on the master's return—or worse still, he might have stayed at home. For the first time a certain free-

masonry was established between the brothers and sisters. Hitherto their rebellion had been too secret even for confederacy, but now some of the crushing weight was lifted, and they could combine—all except Peter, who was too much Reuben's man for them to trust him; luckily he was rather stupid. So Peter did not see and no one else took any notice if Caro read and wept over sentimental novels, or Jemmy brought home harbour mud on his shoes, or George, who was delicate and epileptic, slept away an hour under a hay-stack, or Richard pondered the Iliad, or Tilly ran out on the Moor—even though she went to meet Realf of Grandturzel.

They met on the further side of the fir clump, on the edge of Grandturzel's inclosure. Here Tilly would sit under a gorse-bush with her sewing, while young Realf lay along the grass at her feet. They did not talk much, for Tilly was busy, and generally had her mouth full of pins; but Realf's manhood worshipped her as she sat there, her delicious head bowed, and stains of sunshine, with sprinkled gorse-petals, in her hair. He loved her little determined chin, and the sweet smudge of freckles on her nose. Love filled their simplest actions, kindled their simplest words; it dreamed in their eyes and laughed on their lips; its silences linked them closer than the most passionate embraces.

Both unconsciously dreaded the time when they should demand more of each other—when the occasional enlacing of their hands would no longer be enough to open Paradise, when from sweet looking and longing they would have to pass into the bitterness of action. Tilly, though essentially practical and determined, was enjoying her first visit to faery, and also inherited her mother's gift of languor. She basked in those hours of sun and bees. She, like her father, was passing for the first time into a life outside the dominion of the farm—but,

whereas he fought it, and sought it only to fight it, she submitted to it as to a caress.

She cared nothing for Odiam; it was no thought of disloyalty to it and her father, of breaking from her service, which made her mark time in dreams. As the weeks went by she felt more and more the hatefulness of the yoke. She now had a standard of comparison by which to judge Reuben and Odiam. She saw herself and her brothers and her sister more and more as victims. Other farmers' children were not slaves. Other farms did not hang like sucking incubuses on boys' and girls' backs, draining all the youth and joy and sport out of them.

It made her blood boil to think of Robert and Albert in their exile. Robert had now been released from gaol, and had been sent by a charitable society to Australia. Reuben had refused to move a hand to help him. As for Albert, a few months ago a piteous letter had arrived, begging for money. He had, through Mr. Hedges, found work on a small Radical paper which soon came to grief, and since then had been practically starving, having had no success as a freelance. A friend of his wanted to start a weekly review—Tory this time, for Albert's politics were subservient to occasion—and only required funds. Did Reuben feel prepared to make an investment? Thus poor Albert cloaked and trimmed his begging.

Of course Reuben had refused to help him, and Tilly had been unable to get any money out of Pete. Her heart bled for her brothers, and at the same time she could not help envying their freedom, though one enjoyed it as a beggar and the other as a felon.

§ II.

At last the crisis came—through George, the youngest, least-considered son at Odiam. He had always been a weakling, as if Naomi had passed into his body her own

passionate distaste for life. Also, as is common with epileptic children, his intellect was not very bright. It had been the habit to spare him, even Reuben had done so within reason. But he should not really have worked at all, or only in strict moderation—certainly he should not have been sent out that October evening to dig up the bracken roots on the new land. Tilly expostulated —"Anyhow he didn't ought to work alone"—but Reuben was angry with the boy, whom he had caught loafing once or twice that day, and roughly packed him off.

He himself went over to Moor's Cottage about a load of trifolium, and returning in the darkness by Cheat Land was persuaded to stay to supper. That was one of the nights when he did not like Alice Jury—he sometimes went through the experience of disliking her, which was an adventure in itself, so wild and surprising was it, so bewildering to remember afterwards. She seemed a little colourless—she was generally so vivid that he noticed and resented all the more those times when her shoulders drooped against her chair, and her little face looked strangely wistful instead of eager. It seemed as if on these occasions Alice were actually pleading with him. She lost that antagonism which was the salt of their relations, instead of fighting she pleaded. Pleaded for what? He dared not ask that question, in case the answer should show him some strange new Canaan which was not his promised land. So he came away muttering—"only a liddle stick of a woman. I like gurt women—I like 'em rosy, I like 'em full-breasted. . . . She'd never do fur me."

He tramped home through the darkness. A storm was rising, shaking the fir-plumes of Boarzell against a scudding background of clouds and stars. The hedges whispered, the dead leaves rustled, the woods sighed. Every now and then a bellow would come from the Moor, as the sou'wester roared up in a gust, then a low sobbing followed it into silence.

On the doorstep Reuben was greeted by Tilly—where was George? He had not been in to supper.

"Have you looked in the new field?"

"Yes—Benjamin went round. But he äun't there."

"Well, I döan't know where he is."

"Reckon he's fallen down in a fit somewhere and died."

Tilly was not looking at all like Naomi to-night.

"Nonsense," said Reuben, resenting her manner.

"It äun't nonsense. I always know when his fits are coming on because he's tired and can't work präaperly. He was like that to-day. And you—you drove him out."

Reuben had never been spoken to like this by his daughter. He turned on her angrily, then suddenly changed his mind. For the first time he really saw what a fine girl she was—all that Alice was not.

"We'll go and look for him," he said—"send out the boys."

All that night they hunted for George on Boarzell. It was pitch dark. Soon great layers of cloud were sagging over the stars, and Boarzell's firs were lost in the blackness behind them. Reuben, his sons, Beatup, Piper, Handshut, Boorman, fought the dark with lanterns as one might fight Behemoth with pin-pricks. They scattered over the Moor, searching the thorn-clumps and gorse-thickets. It was pretty certain that he was not on the new ground by Flightshot. Richard said openly that he did not believe in the fit and that George had run away, and—less openly—that it was a good job too. The other boys, however, did not think that he had enough sense to run away, and agreed that his condition all day had foretold an attack.

Reuben himself believed in the fit, and a real anxiety tortured him as he thrust his lantern into the gaping caverns of bushes. He had by his thoughtless and excessive zeal allowed Boarzell to rob him of another man. Of course, it did not follow that George was dead,

but unless they found him soon it was quite likely that he would not survive exposure on such a night. If so, Reuben had only himself to thank for it. He should have listened to his daughter, and either let George off his work or made him work near home. He did not pretend to himself that he loved this weakling son, or that his death would cause his fatherhood much grief, but he found himself with increasing definiteness brought up against the conviction that Boarzell was beating him, wringing its own out of him by slow, inexorable means, paying him back a hundredfold for every acre he took or furrow he planted.

He had become separated from the other searchers, and was alone on the west side of the Moor. The wind barked and howled, hurling itself upon him as he stood, beating his face with hail, which hissed into the dead tangles of the heather, while the stripped thorns yapped and rattled, and the bushes roared. So great was the tumult that he seemed to fall into it like a stone into a wave—it passed over him, round him, seemed even to pass under him, he was hardly conscious of the solid ground. The blackness was impenetrable, save where his lantern stained it with a yellow smudge. He shouted, but his voice perished in the din—it seemed as if his whole man, sight, voice, hearing, and sensation, was blurring into the storm, as if Boarzell had swamped him at last, made him merely one of its hundred voices, mocking the manhood which had tried so much against its earth.

The wind seemed to be laughing at him, as it bellowed up in gusts, struck him, sprayed him, roughed his hair out madly, smacked his cheeks, drove the rain into his skin, and then rumbled away with a hundred chatterings and sighings. It seemed to be telling him that as his breath was to this wind so was he himself to Boarzell. The wind was the voice of the Moor, and it told him that in fighting Boarzell, he did not fight the mere earth,

an agglomeration of lime and clay which he could trample and compel, but all the powers behind it. In arming himself against Boarzell he armed himself against the whole of nature's huge resources, the winds, the storms, the droughts, the early and the latter rain, the poisons in plants, and the death in stones, the lusts which spilling over from the beasts into the heart of man slay him from within himself. He had armed himself against all these, and once again the old words sang in his head—"Canst thou draw out Leviathan with a hook? or bore his jaw through with a thorn? Will he make a covenant with thee? Wilt thou take him for a servant for ever?"

He had shrunk into the rattling shelter of some thorn-bushes. They scraped their boughs like grotesque violins, and every other moment they would sweep down over him and shut him into a cavern of snapping twigs. He was soaked to the skin and his teeth chattered. He lay close to the earth, seeking shelter even from the skeleton heather which writhed woody stems all round him. He cursed. Must he spend the night here, lost and grovelling, to listen while Boarzell screeched its triumph over his cold, drenched body. . . .

"Canst thou draw out Leviathan with a hook? or bore his jaw through with a thorn? Will he make a covenant with thee? Wilt thou take him for a servant for ever?

"His heart is as firm as a stone; yea, as hard as a piece of the nether millstone.

"The sword of him that layeth at him cannot hold; the spear, the dart, nor the habergeon.

"He esteemeth iron as straw, and brass as rotten wood.

"Sharp stones are under him . . ."

A crash of thunder and a spit of lightning tore open the sky, and for a moment Reuben saw the slope of the Moor livid in the flash, and the crest of firs standing

against the split and tumbling clouds. The air rang, screamed, hissed, rushed, and rumbled. Reuben, hardly knowing what he did, had sprung to his feet.

" I'll have wheat growing here in a twelvemonth ! " he shouted.

§ 12.

The dawn broke over Boarzell like a reconciliation. The clamouring voices of wind and trees were still, and only a low sobbing came now and then from the woods. In the sky pale streamers of rose barred and striped a spreading violet. One or two clouds flew low, and slowly pilled themselves, scattering into the fields. On every blade of grass and twig of thorn, on every leaf and spine, glimmered pearls of rain, washing the air with a faint scent of stagnant water, perfuming it with the steams of sodden grass.

Reuben crept out of his thorn cavern and looked down the slope. At the bottom by Socknersh one or two lanterns moved through the dusk. He stiffly threw up his arm and tried to shout. His throat felt cramped and swollen, and it was not till after one or two attempts that a sound pitifully like a bleat came out of it. A voice answered him from the hollow, and then he saw that they were carrying something. He limped painfully down to them. Richard, Boorman, and Handshut carried a hurdle between them, and on the hurdle lay a draggled boy, whose clenched hand clutched a tuft of earth and grass as a victim might clutch a handful of his murderer's hair.

" Is he dead ? " asked Reuben.

" Yes, mäaster," said Boorman.

Richard's mouth twisted in contemptuous silence—Handshut being young and silly was crying.

" He wurn't on the new land," continued Boorman, " he'd fallen into the ditch by Socknersh palings—that's why we cudn't find un. Reckon as he'd felt the

fitses coming on un, and tried to git höame, pore souly."

"When did you find him?"

"Half an hour agone. He'd bin dead for hours, mäaster. He must have choked in the ditch—see, his mouth is full of mud."

Reuben drew back with a shiver. He limped behind the little procession towards Odiam, slouching for the first time in his life. In spite of his conquests he and Boarzell still were quits, still had to prove which was the better man. George, lying there muddy, white, and crumpled, was a sign that the Moor had its victories, in spite of the spreading corn.

He looked down at George—the boy's face had an unhuman chalky appearance under the mudstains; on the forehead a vein had swollen up in black knots, others showed pale, almost aqueous, through the stretched skin. After all, George was the weakest, the best-spared of his children. This thought comforted and stiffened him a little, and he went into the house with something of his old uprightness.

The other children were in the kitchen. They had seen their dead brother from the window, and stood mute and tearless as he was carried into the room. Reuben gave orders for him to be taken upstairs and the doctor to be sent for. No one else spoke. Tilly's breast heaved stormily, and he did not like the dull blaze in her eyes. Strange to say, of his whole family, excepting Pete, she was the only one of whom he was not faintly contemptuous. She had spirit, that girl—he prophesied that she would turn out a shrew.

For the very reason that he could not despise her, he took upon himself to bully her now.

"Get me some tea," he said roughly, "I'm cold."

§ 13.

Though there had been no open rupture, from that day forward Odiam was divided into two camps. On one side were Reuben and Pete, on the other, Tilly and Richard. Benjamin and Caro were neutrals ; they were indifferent to vital issues, one engrossed in snatching holidays, the other in hankering after she did not quite know what. Pete had always been a good son, hard-working and enthusiastic, not exactly a comrade, but none the less an ally, always to be depended on and now and then taken into confidence. He seemed to accept his father's attitude towards George's death and to resent Richard's and Tilly's. That spring he beat Squinty Bream at Robertsbridge Fair, and gave half the purse to Reuben to buy a chaff-cutter.

Of the enemy Tilly was the most effective—Reuben did not quite know how to deal with her. His inability to despise her told heavily against him. Richard, on the other hand, he despised from the depths of his heart. The boy was insufferable, for he still had his old knack of saving his skin. It was nearly always impossible to pick any definite faults in his work—it was wonderful how he managed to combine unwillingness with efficiency. He also had an irritating habit of speaking correct English, and of alluding to facts and events of which Reuben had never heard in such a manner as to make it impossible for him not to show his ignorance.

Reuben never lost a chance of baiting him, he jibed at his squeamishness and fine manners, at his polite way of eating and the trouble he took to clean his nails ; he despised him all the more for occasionally getting the better of him, verbally at any rate, in these encounters. One night at supper Reuben, having actually succeeded in finding this sneering son at fault, abused him roundly for the shocking condition of the ewes' fleeces. Richard

had the bad sense to quote Shakespeare, whereat Reuben told him that if he could not speak English he could leave the room. Richard replied that he would be very pleased to do so, as certain people's table-manners made supper rather an ordeal. Reuben helped him out with a kick most vulgarly placed.

The next day Backfield was due at an auction at Northiam, but before leaving he ordered Richard to clean out the pig-sties. It was not, properly speaking, his work at all, but Reuben hoped it would make him sick, or that he would refuse to obey and thus warrant his father knocking him down.

"Certainly," said Richard without a tremor.

"Oh, thank you," said Reuben, bowing in mock politeness, and trying to copy his clipped English.

Ten minutes later he rode off, and the family separated to their tasks, or to such evasions of them as were possible in the master's absence.

Tilly cleared the table and began to prepare the dinner. She had promised the boys a bag pudding, and must start it early. She had not been cooking more than half an hour when the door opened, and Richard came in, dressed in a neat black suit with a stiff Gladstone collar. His hair was nicely brushed, and he carried a pair of gloves and a little valise.

"Oh!" cried Tilly.

"I'm off," said Richard shortly, banging down his valise on the table.

"Off!—where?"

"To London."

Tilly gaped at him.

"I'm sick of all this, I'm sick of the old man and his beastliness. Miss Bardon is lending me money to go to London University, and perhaps I shall read for the Bar."

"The Bar," repeated Tilly vaguely.

"Yes, I've learned a heap of Latin and other things

during the last five years, and two or three years at the University ought to be all I want. Miss Bardon's taught me—I owe everything to her."

"I must say as how you've kept it dark."

She knew of his friendship with Anne Bardon, but had never expected it to bear such generous fruit.

"Well, it would never have done if the old man had got to know of it. Good heavens, Tilly! How can you live on with that old brute?"

"Maybe I shan't much longer," said Tilly, looking down at her rolling-pin.

Richard stared at her for a moment—"I'm glad to hear it. But the others—oh, my dear girl, this is damnable!"

Tilly sighed.

"The law ought to suppress such men—it ought to be a criminal offence to revert to type—the primordial gorilla."

"But fäather's a clever man—Albert always used to say so."

"Yes, in a cunning, brutish sort of way—like a gorilla when he's set his heart on a particular cocoanut. Boarzell's his cocoanut, and he's done some smart things to get it—and in one way at least he's above the gorilla, for he can enslave other people of superior intelligence to sweat under his orders for what they care nothing about."

"We're all very unlucky," said Tilly, "to have been born his children. But one by one we're gitting free. There'll soon be only Pete and Jemmy and Caro left."

"And I hope to God they'll have the wit to follow the rest of us. I'd like to see that old slave-driver left quite alone. Heavens! I could have strangled him yesterday—I should have, if I hadn't had this to look forward to."

"Where are you going to stay in London?"

" Miss Bardon's taken some rooms for me in Montagu Street."

" She's good to you, Richard."

" She's an angel "—he lifted his eyes, and his mouth became almost worshipful—" she's an angel, who's raised me out of hell. I shall never be able to repay her, but she doesn't expect it. All she wants is my success."

" I wish Caro or Jemmy cud meet someone like her. I döan't think as Pete minds."

" No, he's quite the young gorilla. Now I must be off, Tilly. I'll write to you."

" Oh, wöan't fäather be in a taking ! "

" I reckon—I expect he will. But don't you mind him, little sister. He isn't worth it."

He stooped and kissed her.

" Good-bye. Say it to the others for me."

" Good-bye—good luck to you."

. . . And he was gone—walking past the window in a top-hat.

§ 14.

It would be mere politeness to describe as a " taking " Reuben's condition when he heard Richard had gone. He was in a stamping, bellowing, bloodshot rage. He sent for various members of his family, questioned them, stormed at them, sent them away, then sent for them again. He boxed Caro's ears because she cried—hitherto he had kept his hands off the girls. As for Tilly, he would have liked to have whipped her—he felt sure that somehow it was all her doing—but the more furious he grew, the more he felt himself abashed by her manner, at once so soft and so determined, and he dared do no more than throw his boots at her.

After a night of cursings and trampings in his room, he took the fermenting dregs of his wrath to Cheat Land. It was queer that he should go for sympathy to Alice Jury, who was chief in the enemy's camp. But

though he knew she would not take his part, she would not be like the others, leering and cackling. She would give him something vital, even if it was only a vital opposition. That was all the difference between her and everyone else—she opposed him not because she was flabby or uninterested or enterpriseless, but because she really hated what he strove for. She was his one strong candid enemy, so he went to her as his only friend.

She was shocked at his white twitching face and bloodshot eyes; for the first time since she had known him, Reuben came to her bereft of that triumphant manhood which had made him so splendid to watch in his struggles.

"The hound!" he cried, striking his fists together, "the miserable, cowardy hound!—gone and left me—gone to be a gentleman, the lousy pig. Oh, Lard, I wish as I had him in these hands o' mine!—I'd mäake a gentleman of him!"

Alice, as he expected, had caustic for him rather than balm.

"Once again," she said slowly, "I ask you—is it worth while?"

"Wot's worth while?"

"You know. I asked you that question the first or second time I saw you. No one had ever asked it you before, and you would have liked to beat me."

"I shud like to beat you now—talking of wot you know naun about."

"I daresay—but I'm not your son or your daughter or your wife——"

"I never beat my wife."

"Chivalrous, humane man!—well, anyhow I'm not anyone you can beat, so I dare ask—is it worth while?"

"And I ask wot d'you mean by 'worth while'?"

"You know that it's Boarzell and your farm which have lost you your boys."

"I know nothing of the sort."

"Well, would Robert have stolen money, or Albert disgraced your name, to get free, if you and your farm hadn't made them slaves? If you hadn't been a heartless slave-driver would George have died the other night alone on the Moor?—or would Richard have taken advantage of a neighbour's charity to escape from you? Don't you see that your ambition has driven you to make slaves of your children?"

"Well, they wŏan't wark fur me of their free will. Lard knows I've tried to interest 'em. . . ."

"But how can you expect them to be interested? Your ambition means nothing to them."

"It ought to—Odiam's their home jest as it's mine."

"But don't you see that you've forced them to give up all the sweet things of life for it?—Robert his love, and Albert his poetry, and Richard his education."

"Well, I gave up all the sweet things of life, as you call 'em—and why shudn't they?"

"Because you gave those things up of your free will—they were made to give them up by force. You've no right to starve and deny other people as you have to starve and deny yourself."

"I döan't see that. Wot I can do, they can."

"But—as experience has taught you—they won't. You can see now what your slave-driving's brought you to—you've lost your slaves."

"Well, and I reckon they wurn't much loss, nuther"—the caustic was healing after all—"Robert wur a fool wot didn't know how to steal a ten-pound note, Albert wur always mooning and wasting his time, and George wur a pore thing not worth his keep. As for Richard—that Richard—who wants a stuck-up, dentical, high-nosed, genteel swell about the pläace? I reckon as I'm well shut of the whole four of 'em. They wurn't worth the food they ate, surelye!"

"That's what strikes me as so pathetic."

"Wot?"

"That you should be able to comfort yourself with the thought that they weren't worth much to you as a farmer. What were they worth to you as a father?"

"Naun."

"Quite so—and that's what makes me pity you," and suddenly her eyes kindled, blazed, as with her spirit itself for fuel—"I pity you, I pity you—poor, poor man!"

"Adone do wud that—though you sound more as if you wur in a black temper wud me than as if you pitied me."

"I am angry with you just because I pity you. It's a shame that I should have to pity you—you're such a splendid man. It ought to be impossible to pity you, but I do—I pity you from my soul. Think what you're missing. Think what your children might have been to you. How you might have loved that dear stupid Robert—how proud you might have been of Albert, and of Richard leaving you for a professional career . . . and poor little George, just because he was weak and unlike the rest, he might have been more to you than them all. Then there's your brother Harry——"

"Come, come—stick to the truth. I äun't to blame for Harry."

"But can't you see that he's the chief part of the tragedy you're bringing on yourself and everyone?—He's the type, he's the chorus, the commentary on every act. Reuben, can't you see—oh, why won't you see?—he's you, yourself, as you really are!"

"Nonsense!—döan't be a fool, my gal."

"Yes—you—blind, crazy with your ambition, repulsive and alone in it. Don't you see?"

He smiled grimly—"I döan't."

"No—you don't see this hideous thing that's pursuing you, that's stripping you of all that ought to be yours, that's making you miss a hundred beautiful

things, that's driving you past all your joys—this Boarzell. . . ."

" —äun't driving me, anyhow. I'm fighting it."

" No," said Alice. " It's I who am fighting Boarzell."

§ 15.

Early the next year, Tilly married Realf of Grandturzel.

Reuben received the blow in silence—it stunned him. He did not go over to Cheat Land—something, he scarcely knew what, kept him away. In the long yellow twilights he wandered on Boarzell. The rain-smelling March wind scudded over the grass, over the wet furrows of his cornfields, over the humming tops of the firs that, with the gorse splashed round their trunks, marked the crest of the Moor and of his ambition. Would they ever be his, those firs ? Would he ever tear up that gorse and fling it on the bonfire, as he had torn up the gorse on the lower slopes and burned it with roars and cracklings and smoke that streamed over the Moor to Totease ? Perhaps Realf would have the firs and the gorse, and pile that gorgeous bonfire. Tilly would put him up to her father's game—Reuben's imagination again failed to conceive the man who did not want Boarzell—she would betray Odiam's ambitions, and babble its most vital secrets. Tilly, Reuben told Boarzell, was a bitch.

It became now all the more necessary to smash Realf. He could no longer be content with keeping just ahead of him ; he must establish a sort of two-power standard, and crush his rival to the earth. That was not a good summer for expansion—a drought baked up the greater part of Sussex, and there was an insect plague in the hops—nevertheless, Reuben bought thirty-five acres of Boarzell, on the east slope, by the road. He was tormented by a fear that Realf would buy the land if he

did not, and, moreover, during May two boards had appeared advertising it as " an eligible building site " ; which was possibly bluff, possibly unusual cunning on the part of Flightshot, made resourceful by its straits.

He no longer had any direct intercourse with the Bardons. Their latest impropriety had put them beyond even the favour of a casual nod. If they chose to break up his family they must take the consequences. He only wished he could break up their estate, sell their rat-holed old Manor over their heads, and leave them unprotected by landed property to the sure workings of their own incompetence.

He did not fail to show his neighbours how he despised Flightshot, and the more humorously inclined among them were never tired of asking how soon it would be before Richard married Anne.

" Your family seems to be in a marrying way jest now, Mus' Backfield—there's your daughter made an unaccountable fine match, and it's only nat'ral as young Richard shud want to do as well fur himself."

Reuben treated these irreverences with scorn. Nothing would make him abate a jot of his dignity. On the contrary, his manner and his presence became more and more commanding. He drove a splendid blood mare in his gig, smoked cigars instead of pipes, and wore stand-up collars about four inches high—when he was not working, for it had not struck him that it was undignified to work, and he still worked harder on his farm than the worst-paid pig-boy.

He was more stoutly resolved than ever that the mob of small farmers and incompetents should not gape at his misfortunes. So he hid under a highly repulsive combination of callousness and swagger his grief for his sons' defection, his rage and shame at Tilly's marriage, and his growing anxiety about Odiam. That summer had been terrible—a long drought had been followed too late by thundery rains. His harvest had been

parched and scrappy, most of the roots shedding their seed before reaping ; the green-fly had spoiled several acres of hops, which otherwise would have been the one bright patch in the season ; his apples and pears had been eaten by wasps ; and then a few untimely showers had beaten down two fields of barley yet unreaped and his only decent crop of aftermath hay.

If Grandturzel had fared as badly he could have borne it, but Grandturzel, though scarred, came out of the summer less battered than he. Realf's oats, being in a more sheltered position, did no private threshing of their own ; his hops for the most part escaped the blight, and though he lost a good deal on his plums, his apples were harvested at a record, and brought him in nearly ten pounds an acre. On both farms the milk had done badly, but as Realf's dairy business was not so extensive as Backfield's, he was better able to stand its partial collapse.

Reuben felt that Tilly was at the bottom of his rival's success. She was practical and saving, the very virtues which Realf lacked and the want of which might have wrecked him. She doubtless was responsible for the good condition of his orchards and the immunity of his hops ; she had probably told her husband of that insect-spray of her father's—which had failed him that summer, being too much diluted by the fool who mixed it, but had proved a miracle of devastation in other years.

He wanted to smash Tilly even more than he wanted to smash Realf. He had seen her twice since her marriage—meeting her once in Rye, and once on Boarzell—and each sight had worked him into a greater rage. Her little figure had strengthened and filled out, her demure self-confidence had increased, her prettiness was even more adorable now that the rose had deepened on her cheeks and her gowns strained over her breast ; she was enough to fill any man with wrath at the joke of

things. Tilly ought to be receiving the wages of her treachery in weariness and anxiety, fading colour and withering flesh—and here she was all fat and rosy and happy, well-fed and well-beloved. He hated her and called her a harlot—because she had betrayed Odiam for hire and trafficked in its shame.

§ 16.

He had been forced to engage a woman to help Caro in the house, and also a shepherd for Richard's work. His family had been whittled down to almost nothing. Only Caro, Pete, and Jemmy were left out of his eight splendid boys and girls. Caro, Pete, Jemmy, and hideous, mumbling Harry—he surveyed the four of them with contemptuous scowls. Pete was the only one who was worth anything—Caro and Jemmy would turn against him if they had the slightest chance and forsake him with the rest. As for Harry, he was a grotesque, an image, a hideous fum—" Reuben himself as he really was." He ! He !

The weeks wore on and it dawned on him that he must pull himself together for a fresh campaign. He must have more warriors—he could not fight Boarzell with only traitors and hirelings. He must marry again.

It was some time since the abstract idea of marriage had begun to please him, but lately the abstract of marriage had always led to the concrete of Alice Jury, so he had driven it from his thoughts. Now, more and more clearly, he saw that he must marry. He wanted a woman and he wanted children, so he must marry. But he must not marry Alice.

Of late he had resumed his visits to Cheat Land, discontinued for a while at Tilly's marriage. The attraction of Alice Jury was as strong, unfathomable, and unaccountable as ever. Since the stormy interview after Richard's desertion they had not discussed his ambitions

for Odiam and Boarzell, but that meeting was none the less stamped on Reuben's memory with a gloomy significance. It was not that Alice's arguments had affected him at all—she had not penetrated to the springs of his enterprise, she had not touched or conjured the hidden part of him in which his ambition's roots were twined round all that was vital and sacred in the man. But somehow she had expressed her own attitude with an almost sinister clearness—" It's I who am fighting Boarzell." What should she fight it for ?—imagine that she fought it, rather, for a woman could not really fight Boarzell. She was fighting it for him. She wanted him.

He knew that Alice wanted him, and he knew that he wanted Alice. He did not know why he wanted Alice any more than he knew why Alice wanted him. " Wot is she ?—a liddle stick of a creature. And I like big women."

There was something in the depths of him that cried for her, something which had never moved or cried in him before. In spite of her lack of beauty and beguilement, in spite of her hostility to all his darling schemes, there was something in him to which Alice actually and utterly belonged. He did not understand it, he could not analyse it, he scarcely indeed realised it—all he felt was the huge upheaval, the conflict that it brought, all the shouting and the struggling of the desperate and motiveless craving that he felt for her—a hunger in him calling through days and nights, in spite of her insignificance, her aloofness, her silences, her antagonism.

" I reckon as how I must be in love."

That was the conclusion he came to after much heavy pondering. He had never been truly in love before. He had wanted women for various reasons, either for their charm and beauty, or because, as in Naomi's case, of their practical use to him. Alice had no beauty, and a charm too subtle for him to realise, though as a matter of fact

the whole man was plastic to it—as for practical usefulness, she was poor, delicate, unaccustomed to country life, and hostile to all his most vital ambitions. She would not bring him wealth or credit, she was not likely to bear him healthy children—and yet he loved her.

Sometimes, roaming through murky dusks, he realised in the dim occasional flashes which illuminate the non-thinking man, that he was up against the turning-point of his fight with Boarzell. If he married Alice it would be the token of what had always seemed more unimaginable than his defeat—his voluntary surrender. Sometimes he told himself fiercely that he could fight Boarzell with Alice hanging, so to speak, over his arm ; but in his heart he knew that he could not. He could not have both Alice and Boarzell.

Yet, in spite of all this, one day at Cheat Land he nearly fell at her feet and asked her to be his ruin.

It was a March twilight, cold and rustling, and tart with the scents of newly turned furrows. Reuben sat with Alice in the kitchen, and every now and then Jury's wretched house-place would shake as the young gale swept up rainless from the east and poured itself into cracks and chimneys. Alice was sewing as usual—it struck Reuben that she was very quick and useful with her fingers, whatever might be her drawbacks in other ways. Sometimes she had offered to read poetry to him, and had once bored him horribly with In Memoriam, but as he had taken no trouble to hide his feelings she had to his great relief announced her intention of casting no more pearls before swine.

She was silent, and the firelight playing in her soft, lively eyes gave her a kind of mystery which for the first time allowed Reuben a glimpse into the sources of her attraction. She was utterly unlike anything there was or had been in his life, the only thing he knew that did not smell of earth. The pity of it was that he loved that strong-smelling earth so much.

"Alice," he said suddenly—"Do you think as how you could ever care about Boarzell?"

"No, I'm quite sure I couldn't."

"Not ever?"

"Never."

"Why?"

"Because I hate it. It's spoiling your life. It's making a beast and a maniac of you. You think of nothing—absolutely nothing—but a miserable rubbish-heap that most people would be throwing their old kettles on."

"That's just the point, my gal. Where most föalkses 'ud be throwing old kettles, I shall be growing wheat."

"And what good will that do you?"

"Good!—when I've two hundred acres sown with grain!"

"Yes, grain that's fertilised with the rotting remains of all that ought to have made your life good and sweet."

"You wöan't understand. There's naun in the world means anything to me but my farm. Oh, Alice, if you could only see things wud my eyes and stand beside me instead of agäunst me."

"Then there would be no more friendship between us. What unites us is the fact that we are fighting each other."

"Döan't talk rubbidge, liddle gal. It's because I see all the fight there is in you that I'd sooner you fought for me than agäunst me. Couldn't you try, Alice?"

His voice had sunk very low, almost to sweetness. A soft flurry of pink went over her face, and her eyelids drooped. Then suddenly she braced herself, pulled herself taut, grew combative again, though her voice shook.

"No, Reuben, I could never do anything but fight your schemes. I think you are wasting and spoiling your life, and there's no use expecting me to stand by you."

He now realised the full extent of his peril, because for the first time he saw her position unmasked. She would never beguile him with the thought that she could help him in his life's desire ; she would not alter the essential flavour of their relationship to suit his taste —rather she would force him to swallow it, she would subdue by strength and not by stealth, and fight him to the end.

He must escape, for if he surrendered now the battle was over, and he would have betrayed Boarzell the loved to something he loved less—loved less, he knew it, though he wavered.

He rose to his feet. The kitchen was dark, with eddying sweeps of shadow in the corners which the firelight caressed—while a single star put faint ghostly romance into the window.

" I—I must be gitting back home."

Alice rose too, and for a moment he was surprised that she did not try to keep him ; instead, she said :

" It's late."

He moved a step or two towards the door, and suddenly she added in a low broken voice :

" But not too late."

The floor seemed to rise towards him, and the star in the window to dance down into Castweasel woods and up again.

Alice stood in the middle of the room, her face bloomed with dusk and firelight, her hands stretched out towards him. . . .

There was silence, in which a coal fell. She still stood with her arms outstretched ; he knew that she was calling him—as no woman had ever called him—with all that of herself which was in his heart, part of his own being.

" Reuben."

" Alice."

He came a few steps back into the room. . . .

It was those few steps which lost him to her, for they brought him within sight of Boarzell—framed in the window, where Castweasel woods had been. It lay in a great hush, a great solitude, a quiet beast of power and mystery. It seemed to call to him through the twilight like a love forsaken. There it lay, Boarzell—strong, beautiful, desired, untamed, still his hope, still his battle. And Alice? . . . He gave her a look, and left her.

"I once töald a boy of mine," he said to himself as he crossed the Moor, "that the sooner he found he could do wudout love the better. . . . Well, I reckon I'm not going to be any weaker than my words."

BOOK V

ALMOST UNDER

§ 1.

REUBEN did not go back to Cheat Land for several weeks. Those five minutes had been too much for him. He would never again risk putting himself in the power of things he did not understand. Besides, he felt vaguely that after what had happened Alice would not want to see him. She had humiliated herself, or rather he had humiliated her—for she had put out in one swift dark minute all the powers of her nature to bind him, and she had failed. He remembered her voice when she whispered, "But not too late," and her eyes afterwards, smouldering in shadow, and her little hands held out to him. . . . There had been nothing definite, obvious, or masterful, yet in those few words and actions her whole self had pleaded on its knees—and he had turned away.

But sometimes what kept him from her more than the thought of her humiliation was the thought of his own. For sometimes it seemed almost as if she had humbled him more than he had humbled her. He could not tell whether this sick feeling of shame which occasionally swamped him was due to the fact that he had so nearly surrendered to her or to the fact that he had not quite done so. Sometimes he thought it was the latter. The whole thing was ridiculous and perplexing, a lesson to him not to adventure into subtleties but to keep in communion with the broad plain things of earth.

Early in May he found a visit to Cheat Land forced upon him. Jury wanted to buy a cow of his, but one of the sudden chills to which he was liable kept him indoors. Reuben was anxious to sell the animal, and, there being one or two weak points about her, would trust nobody but himself with the negotiations. However, the visit would be quite safe, for he was not likely to see Alice alone, indeed it was probable that he might not see her at all.

On reaching the farm he heard several voices in the kitchen, and found the invalid in an arm-chair by the fire, talking to an oldish man and a rather plump pretty girl of about twenty. Jury was an intellectual, incompetent-looking fellow, who seemed elderly, but at the same time gave one the impression that this was due to his health. His grey hair straggled over temples where the skin was stretched tight and yellow as parchment, his cheeks were hollow, his eyes astonishingly like his daughter's. He was one of the arguments against the marriage.

Alice had let Reuben in. She looked a little tired, but otherwise quite cheerful, and she welcomed him simply and naturally.

"This is Miss Lardner," she said, introducing him to the girl, "and Mr. Lardner of Starvecrow."

"I heard as how Starvecrow had been bought at last," said Reuben; "not a bad farm, Muster, if you're fur green crops mostly."

"Potatoes," said Lardner, "potatoes—if farmers 'ud only grow potatoes and not think so much of grain and rootses, we shudn't hear of so many of 'em going bust."

The conversation became agricultural, but in spite of the interest such a topic always had for him, Reuben could not help watching the two girls. Miss Lardner, whom Alice called Rose, was a fine creature, so different from the other as to make the contrast almost laughable. She was tall and strapping—in later life she might

become over stout, but at present her figure was splendid, superbly moulded and erect. She looked like a young goddess as she sat there, one leg crossed over the other, showing her white stocking almost to the knee. There was something arrogant in her attitude, as if she was aware of the splendour of her body, and gloried in it. Her face too was beautiful—though less classically so—rather broad, with high flat cheek-bones, and a wide full-lipped mouth which would have given it almost a Creole look, if it had not been for her short delicate nose and her fair ruddiness. Her hair seemed to hesitate between gold and brown—her eyes between boldness and languor.

Reuben found himself glancing at her continually, and though she seldom met his eyes, he knew that she was aware of his scrutiny. He sometimes felt that Alice was aware of it too.

As the conversation wore on, and became more general, Lardner said something about going over to Snailham and taking Rose home on the way.

"Oh, no, Uncle—I don't want to go. Alice has asked me to stay to supper."

"But you can't go home alone, and I can't wait wud you, surelye."

"I'll take Miss Lardner home," said Reuben.

Directly he had said the words, he looked over at Rose to see how she would receive them. Her eyelashes lay black and curly against her cheek, then they lifted slowly, and her eyes looked out from under the half-raised lids with a kind of demure roguishness. At the same time her lower lip seemed to quiver and plump out, while the corners of her mouth rose and curled. He suddenly felt a desire to plant a kiss fairly on that wet red mouth, which from away across the room seemed to pout towards him.

§ 2.

Supper was a quiet meal. Old Jury and his invalid wife sat at each end of the table, while Alice did most of the helping and waiting. They seemed a sorry three to Reuben, pale, washed out, and weakly, their eyes bright as birds' with the factitious light of their enthusiasms for things that did not matter. They ate without much appetite, picking daintily at their food, their knives never in their mouths. Reuben found himself despising them as he despised the Bardons.

Rose did not talk much, but she ate heartily—she must be as healthy as she looked. Once or twice during the meal Reuben caught himself staring at her lips—they were extraordinarily red, and at the end of the meal the juice of her pudding had stained them purple.

She said that she must leave directly after supper. Alice fetched her hat, which was not the kind that Reuben had ever seen on country girls, being of the fashionable pork-pie shape. All her clothes were obviously town-made ; she wore a blue stuff dress, tight-fitting round her bust and shoulders, full and flounced in the skirt—afterwards he heard that Rose had spent some years with relations in London before coming to live at Starvecrow.

He gave her his arm, said good-bye to Alice in the doorway, and went through the little garden where flowers crowded out vegetables in a very unbusiness-like way, into the lane which wound past Cheat Land and round the hanger of Boarzell, to the farms of the Brede Valley.

Rose, a little to his surprise, began to chatter volubly. She talked very much like a child, with naïve comments, about simple things. She asked trivial questions, and screamed with delight when some dusk-blinded bird flew against her breast and dashed down heavily into

the ruts. She exclaimed at the crimson moon which rose behind the hedge like a hot penny—she laughed at the slightest provocation ; and yet all the while he was conscious of an underlayer of shrewdness, he had an extraordinary conviction of experience.

Besides, while she laughed and babbled like a child, her eyes continually rose towards his with a woman's calculated boldness. They spoke something quite different from her lips—the combination was maddening; and those lips, too, in their rare silences, were so unlike the words they uttered that he scarcely knew whether he wanted most to silence them completely or never let them be silent.

"I don't like Alice Jury," she prattled, "she says just the opposite of what you say. She never lets herself agree with anyone. She's a contradictious female."

Then suddenly she was silent—and Reuben kissed her.

He crooked his arm round her and held her close to him, standing there in the lane. Her lips slowly parted under his, then suddenly she threw her head back in a kind of ecstasy, giving him the white expanse of her neck, which he kissed, giddy with a soft fragrance that rose from her clothes, reminding him a little of clover.

She was so obviously and naïvely delighted, that when he drew himself up, his idea of her was again one of extreme childishness. And yet it was evident that she was used to kisses, and that he had kissed her at her own unspoken invitation.

They walked on down the lane. Rose's chatter had ceased, and a complete silence dropped between the hedges. The moon had risen higher, and the western hazels were bloomed with light. The moon was no longer crimson in the dark sky, but had burnt down to copper, casting a copper glow into the mists, staining all the blues that melted into one another along the hills. Only the middle of the lane was black—like a well. Reuben

and Rose could see each other's faces in a kind of rusty glimmer, but their feet stumbled in the darkness, and her hand lay clutching and heavy on his arm.

At last they came to Castweasel—three old cottages and a ruined one, leaning together in a hollow like mushrooms. Beside the ruined cottage a tree-trunk was lying, and Rose suddenly stretched herself with a little sigh.

"I'm tired—let's sit down and rest a bit."

They sat down on the log, and she immediately crept close to him like a child. He put his arm round her, and once again she thrilled him with her own delight—she stole her arms round his neck, holding his head in the crook of her elbows, and laughed with her mouth against his. Then her hands crept into his hair, and rumpled it, while she whispered like a child finding some new virtue in its toy—"How thick! how thick!" At last she drew his head down to her breast, holding it there with both hands while she dipped her kisses on his eyes. . . .

Reuben was in ecstasy by this time. It was years since he had caressed a woman, except casually, for he considered that women interfered with his work. Rose's eagerness could not cheapen her, for it was so childlike, and she continued to give him that sense of deep experience which robbed her attitude of insipidity. Her delight in his kisses was somehow made sweeter to him by the conviction that she could compare them with other men's.

She began to laugh—she became gay and mettlesome. Her whole nature seemed changed, and he found it hard to think of her as the beautiful yet rather lumpish girl who had sat in the silence of a good appetite at the Cheat Land supper-table. Behind them the ruin of the old cottage sent out bitter-sweet scents of decay—its crumbling plaster and rotting lath perfumed the night. Fragrances strove in the air—the scent of Rose's clothes,

and of her big curls tumbling on his shoulder, the scent of still water, of dew-drenched leaves, and damp, teeming soil—sweet vagabond scents of bluebells, puffed on sudden breezes. . . .

Reuben was growing drunken with it all—he strained Rose to him; she was part of the night. Just as her scents mingled with its scents, so he and she both mingled with the hush of the lightless, sorrowless fields, the blots of trees, the woods that whispered voicelessly. . . . Above the hedges, stars winked and flashed, dancing in the crystalline air. Right overhead the Sign of Cancer jigged to its image in Castweasel Pool. Reuben looked up, and through a gate he saw Boarzell rearing like a shaggy beast towards him. He suddenly became more aware of Boarzell than of anything in the night, than of the flowers or the water or the stars, or even Rose, drowsing against his shoulder with parted lips. Boarzell filled the night. The breeze became suddenly laden with scents of it—the faint bitterness of its dew-drenched turf where the bracken-crosiers were beginning to uncurl, of its noon-smelling gorse, of its heather-tangle, half budding, half dead, of its fir-needles and its fir-cones, rotting and sprouting. All seemed to blend together into a strong, heady, ammoniacal smell . . . the great beast of Boarzell dominated the night, pawed Reuben, roared over him, made him suddenly mad, clutching Rose till she cried out with pain, kissing her till she broke free, and stood before him pale and dishevelled, with anger in her eyes.

He sprang to his feet, the mood had passed—the beast of Boarzell had ceased to worry him.

"I'm sorry," he said sheepishly.

"And well you may be," said Rose, "you've torn my gown."

They walked on down the lane; she pouted and swung her hat. Reuben, anxious to propitiate, picked primroses under the hedge and gave them to her.

She looked pleased at once, and began to eat them.

"Wot," said Reuben, "you eat flowers?"

"Yes," she answered, "I love eating primroses—pick me some more."

So for the rest of the walk to Starvecrow, he picked primroses, and she nibbled them with her white teeth, which were small and even, except for the two canines, which were pointed like a little animal's.

§ 3.

During the next day or two Reuben thought a great deal about Rose Lardner. He made covert enquiries about her in the neighbourhood. He found out that she was an orphan and old Lardner's only surviving relative. He was an extremely prosperous man, and at his death Rose would have all his money. Moreover, rumour gave him a cancer which would carry him off before very long.

Reuben turned over these facts in his mind. He realised what a fine thing it would be for Odiam if he married Rose. Here was the very wife he wanted—of good standing in the neighbourhood, and something of an heiress, young and healthy, and likely to give him stout boys, and also exceedingly attractive in herself.

Under the circumstances he hardly knew what held him back, what made the whole idea vaguely repugnant to him. Surely it could not be his feeling for Alice Jury. The terrible thought suggested itself that his love for Alice would survive all the outward signs of its demolition, that though beaten and killed and destroyed it would haunt him disembodied. That was the secret of its power—its utter lack of corporiety, its independence of the material things a strong man could bend to his will, so that, as it were, one could never lay hands on it, but chased it for ever like a ghost.

Nevertheless, he called at Starvecrow and renewed his impressions of Rose. They did not want much

adjustment ; he found her as he had found her that first evening—childlike in all things save love, indolent, languorous, and yet with gay bursts of spirit which made her charming. He noticed too how well dressed she was —he admired her stuff gown and neat buttoned boots, so different from what he was accustomed to see on the feet of his womenfolk ; he admired the crinkle and gloss of her hair, so beautifully waved and brushed, and scented with some lotion—her hands, too, well kept and white with shining pink nails, her trim muslin collar, the clover scent of her garments . . . it was all new, and gave him somehow a vague feeling of self-respect.

When they were alone she was as eager as ever for his love. He had a precious ten minutes with her in the parlour at Starvecrow, at the end of which in came old Lardner, with talk of crops and beasts. Reuben considered that he had some knowledge of farming—which was a long way for him to go—and took him into confidence about some of Odiam's affairs. The farm was still causing him anxiety, and he felt in need of ready money. He wanted to establish a milk round, with a dairy shop in Rye, but he could not spare the capital.

That visit was the first of several others. Starvecrow took the place of Cheat Land—indeed, he seldom went near Cheat Land now. Rose gave him all the refuge he wanted from the vexings and thwartings of his daily life. She was not, like Alice, a counter-irritant, but a sweet drowse of tenderness and beauty in which he forgot his disappointment, thinking of nothing but the lovely woman he caressed.

She gave him sympathy, too, in a childlike way. She did not like it if he interrupted his love-making to tell her about his plans for Boarzell, but at other moments she seemed to enjoy hearing him talk of his ambition, and often, when the jar and failure of things depressed him, she would take him in her arms, and soothe him like a baby with—" Of course you'll have Boarzell, my

Reuben ; of course it will be yours—you're so strong and masterful, you're bound to get all you want."

Her delight in him never seemed to fail. Sometimes it seemed to him strange that the difference in their ages did not affect her more. She never gave him a hint that she thought him too old for her. He once told her that he was nearly fifty, but she had answered with a happy laugh that she did not like boys.

As a matter of fact, Reuben at fifty was a lover of whom any girl might still be proud. If a little grey had come into his hair, it had merely been to give it the gleam of polished iron, and contrast it more effectively with the swarthiness of his skin. His teeth were as white and even as when he was twenty, for he had never risked spoiling them by too much tobacco—his eyes, dark and bright, were like a boy's ; his broad back was straight, and his powerful arms could lift even the plump Rose to his shoulder. He once carried her on his shoulder all the way from Tide Barn to the beginning of Starvecrow lane.

§ 4.

Towards the end of August, Reuben asked Rose to marry him.

The request was not so much the outcome of passion as might have been imagined from the form it took. It was true that he was deeply enamoured of her, but it was also true that for three months he had endured the intoxication of her presence without definitely, or even indefinitely, claiming her for his own. He had held himself back till he had thoroughly weighed and pondered her in relation to his schemes—he was not going to renounce Alice for a wife who would be herself a drawback in another way.

However, though he had never deceived himself that Rose's sympathetic tendernesses meant any real sharing of his ambition, he was soon convinced that to marry her

would be materially to help himself in the battle which was now dragging a little on his side. He wanted ready money—her settlements would provide that; and her heirship of Lardner held out dazzling hopes for the future. He wanted children—where could he find a healthier mother? He wanted to raise the dignity of Odiam, and could hardly have thought of a better means than marriage with the niece of one of the wealthiest and most important farmers in the parish. To crown all, he gave himself an adorable woman, young, lovely, tender, and gay. This consideration could not have dragged him contrary to his ambition, but combined with it, it could give to an otherwise very practical and material plan all the heats of passion and the glories of romance.

The only disappointment was Rose's reception of his offer. At first she was unaffectedly surprised. She had looked upon the whole affair as a flirtation, of which she had had several, and had never expected it to take such a serious turn.

Even when she had recovered from her surprise, she refused to give him an answer. He became suddenly alarmed lest she thought him too old, and pressing her for her reasons, found that the real matter was that she did not want to sacrifice her freedom.

"Wot do you mean, sweetheart? Döan't you love me?"

"Of course I love you—but it doesn't follow I want to belong to you. Can't we go on as we are?"

"You queer me, Rose. How can we go on as we are?—it's like walking on a road that never leads nowhere."

"Well, that's very nice—I don't always want to go somewhere every time I take a walk, I much prefer just wandering."

"I döan't."

"Because you're so practical and business-like, and I'm afraid you'd try and make me practical and business-like too. That's why I said I wanted to be free."

" You shall be free, Rose—I promise you. You shall do wotsumdever you please."

" Absolutely ' wotsumdever ' ? "

" Yes—wudin reason, of course."

" Ah, that's it. Your reason mightn't be my reason."

" You wudn't find me unreasonable, dear."

" Well, I shall have to think it over."

She thought it over for two months, during which Reuben suffered all the torments of his lot. She soon came to realise and appreciate her powers ; she dangled hopes and fears with equal zest before his eyes, she used his anxieties to stoke the furnaces of his passion, till she had betrayed him into blazes and explosions which he looked on afterwards with uneasy shame.

Once in sick amazement at himself he took refuge at Cheat Land, and sat for an hour in Alice Jury's kitchen, watching her sew. But the springs of his confidence were dried, he could not tell Alice what he felt about Rose. She knew, of course. All the neighbourhood knew he was in love with Rose Lardner, and watched the progress of his courtship with covert smiles.

Rose used often to come to Odiam, where she was at first rather shy of Reuben's children, all of whom were older than herself. In time, however, she outgrew her shyness, and became of an exceedingly mad and romping disposition. She ran about the house like a wild thing, she dropped blackberries into Caro's cream, she tickled Pete's neck with wisps of hay, she danced in the yard with Jemmy. Reuben grew desperate—he felt the hopelessness of capturing this baby who played games with his children ; and yet Rose was in some ways so much older than they—she loved to say risky things in front of the innocent Caro, and howled with laughter when she could not understand—she loved to prod and baffle the two boys, who in this respect were nearly as inexperienced as their sister. Then, on the walk home with Reuben, over Boarzell, she would retail these feats

of hers with gusto, she would invite his kisses, sting up his passion—she tormented him with her extraordinary combinations of childishness and experience, shyness and abandonment, innocence and corruption.

In time the state of his own mind reduced Reuben to silence about his longings. He somehow lost the power of picturing himself married to this turbulent, bewildering creature, half-woman, half-child. He clung to her in silent kisses; leading her home over Boarzell, he would suddenly turn and smother her in his arms, while his breast heaved with griefs and sighings he had not known in the earlier weeks of his courtship.

Rose noticed this difference, and it piqued her. She began to miss his continual protestations. Sometimes she tried to stir them up again, but her bafflings had reacted on herself; she handled him clumsily, he was too mazed to respond to her flicks. Then she became sulky, irritable, slightly tyrannous—even stinting her kisses.

One night early in October he was taking her home. They had crossed Boarzell, and were walking through the lanes that tangle the valley north of Udimore. She walked with her arm conventionally resting on his, her profile demure in the starlight. He felt tired, not in his body, but in his mind—somehow life seemed very aimless and gloomy; he despised himself because he craved for her arms, for her light thoughtless sympathy.

"Why döan't you speak to me, Rose?"

"I was thinking."

"Wot about?"

"Oh, clothes and things."

He stopped suddenly in their walk, as he had often done, and seized her in his arms, swinging her off her feet, burying his face in her wraps to kiss her neck. She kicked and fought him like a wild cat, and at last he dropped her.

"Why wöan't you let me kiss you?"

"Because I won't."

She walked quickly, almost running, and he had to stride to keep up with her.

"You're justabout cruel," he said furiously.

"And so are you."

"Wot have I done?"

"You've changed your mind about wanting to marry me."

He stared at her with his mouth open.

"Rose. . . ."

"Well, don't gape at me. You know you have."

"I justabout haven't. It's you——"

"It isn't me. I only asked for a little time to think it over, and then you go and cool off."

"I—cool off! My dear, I dudn't ever. I never understood—you're such a tedious liddle wild thing."

"Well, do you want to marry me?"

"Rose!"

"And you'll let me do as I like?"

"Rose, marry me."

"Very well—I will. But it's funny I should want to."

Then suddenly her expression changed. Her eyes half closed, her lips parted, and she held out her arms to him with a laugh like a sob.

§ 5.

Reuben and Rose were married in the January of '70. It was the earliest date compatible with the stocking of her wardrobe, a business which immediately absorbed her to the exclusion of everything else.

Meantime Reuben, having repapered the parlour and given a new coat of whitewash to the best bedroom ceiling, discussed settlements with old Lardner. These did not turn out as large as he had hoped—the old man was close, and attempts on his generosity only resulted

in embarrassing doubts as to the disinterestedness of his son-in-law's affections. Reuben comforted himself with the thought that Lardner most certainly had a cancer.

At the wedding Rose fairly dazed the onlookers. She wore a dress of heavy white satin, with a white lace veil—and a bustle. It was the first bustle that had ever been seen in Peasmarsh, or even in Rye. In itself it was devastating enough, but it soon acquired a prophetic and metaphorical significance which made it even more impressive. Spectators saw in it the forecast of Odiam's downfall—"He can't stand that," said Brazier, the new man at Totease, "she's a Jezebubble." —"Only it äun't her head as she's tired this time," said Ticehurst.—"She shud have worn it in front of her, and then we shud have bin interested," said Cooper of Kitchenhour.

Alice Jury and her father were in church. Reuben saw them as he marched up the aisle with an enormous flower in his buttonhole, accompanied by Ginner of Socknersh as his best man. It struck him that she looked more pretty and animated than usual, in a woolly red dress and a little fur cap under which her eyes were bright as a robin's. Even then he felt a little offended and perplexed by her behaviour—she should have drooped—it would have been more becoming if she had drooped.

The remnants of his family were in a front pew—Pete with an elaborately curled forelock, Jemmy casting the scent of cheap hair oil into the prevalent miasma of camphor and moth-killer, and between the two boys, Caro in an unbecoming hat which she wore at a wrong angle, while her dark restless eyes devoured Rose's creamy smartness, from her satin shoes to the wave of curling-irons in her hair. Harry had been left at home —he was in an impossible mood, tormented by some dark current of memory, wandering from room to room

as he muttered—"Another wedding—another wedding —we're always having weddings in this house."

After the ceremony nearly a hundred guests were fed at Starvecrow. All the most important farmers of the neighbourhood were there, except of course Realf of Grandturzel. Rose was like her name-flower, flushed and scented. Very different from his earlier bride, she sat beside Reuben with head erect and smiling lips—she drank with everyone, and the wine deepened the colour of her cheeks and made her eyes like stars. She talked, she laughed, she ate, she was so happy that her glances, full of bold languor, swept round the table, resting on all present as well as the chosen man—she was a gay wife.

Dancing at weddings was dying out as a local fashion, so when the breakfast was over the guests melted away, having eaten and drunk themselves into a desire for sleep. Reuben's family went home. He and Rose lingered a little with her uncle, then as the January night came crisping into the sky and fields, he drove her to Odiam in his gig, as long ago he had driven Naomi. She leaned against his shoulder, for he wanted both hands for his horse, and her hair tickled his neck. She was silent for about the first time that day, and as eager for the kisses he could give her while he drove as Naomi had been shy of them. Above in the cold black sky a hundred pricks of fire shuddered like sparks—the lump of Boarzell was blocked against a powder of stars.

At Odiam Rose shook off her seriousness. Supper was ready, and undaunted by the huge meal she had already eaten, she sat down to it with a hearty appetite. Her step-children stared at her curiously—Rose had a gust of affection for them. Poor things!—their lives had been so crude and dull and innocent. She must give them a little brightness now, soften the yoke of Reuben's tyranny—that girl Caro, for instance, she must

give her some pretty clothes and show her how to arrange her hair becomingly.

Supper was a very gay meal—the gayest there had ever been at Odiam. Rose laughed and talked, as at Starvecrow, and soon her husband and the boys were laughing with her. Some of the things she said were rather daring, and Caro had only a dim idea of what she meant, but Rose's eyes rolling mischievously under the long lashes, and the tip of her tongue showing between her lips, gave her words a devilish bite even if only half understood. Somehow the whole atmosphere of the Odiam kitchen was changed—it was like the lifting of a curtain, the glimpsing of a life where all was gay, where love and ambition and all solemn things were the stuff of laughter.

The boys beat the handles of their knives on the table and rolled in their chairs with wide-open mouths as if they would burst; Reuben leaned back with a great pride and softening in his eyes, round which many hard lines had traced themselves of late; Caro's lips were parted and she seemed half enchanted, half bewildered by the other woman's careless merriment. Only Harry took no interest and looked dissatisfied—"Another wedding," he mumbled as he dribbled his food unnoticed over the cloth—"we're always having weddings in this house."

It was strange that during this gay meal the strongest link was forged between Rose and Caro. Two natures more utterly unlike it would be hard to find—Caro's starved ignorance of love and aged familiarity with dustier matters made her the antithesis of Rose, a child in all things save those of the affections; but the two women's hearts met in their laughter. It was Rose who invited, Caro who responded, for Rose in spite of her years and inexperience had the one advantage which made her the older of the two. She was drawn to Caro partly from essential kindness, partly because she appre-

ciated the luxury of pitying her—Caro responded with all the shy devotion of a warped nature going out towards one who enjoys that for which it unconsciously pines. Rose's beauty, jollity, and happiness made her a goddess to the less fortunate girl.

After supper Rose turned towards her.

"Will you come up and help me unpack?"

Caro flushed with pleasure—a light had kindled in her grey life, and she found herself looking forward to days of basking.

They went up together to the huge low-raftered bedroom, which struck horribly cold.

"Ugh!" said Rose—"no fire!"

"But it's a bedroom."

"That's no reason for not having a fire. I shall freeze. Let's have the servant up to light one."

"Oh, no. I'll light it; Mary's busy clearing the table. But I reckon as fäather wöan't be pleased."

"I'll make him pleased. You leave father to me for the future."

Caro fetched some wood and turf and laid the fire, to which Rose applied a match, feeling that by this she had done her share of the work. Then they began to unpack. There were two trunks full of clothes, and Rose complicated matters by refusing to take things out as they came but diving after various articles she particularly wanted.

"I want my blue negleegy—I must show you my blue negleegy," she panted, up to her elbows in underlinen. "Oh, here it is! what do you think of it?"

"It's silk!" said Caro in a hoarse whisper.

"Of course it is—and the very best silk too. I'll put it on. Please undo my dress."

Caro helped her off with her wedding-dress, and after having recovered her breath, which she lost completely at the sight of the lace on her chemise, she helped her arrange the "negleegy," and watched her open-mouthed

as she posed in it before the fragment of looking-glass.

"Isn't it chick?" said Rose, "I got it in Hastings—they say it is copied from a Paris model. Now let's go on with the unpacking."

They went on—that is to say Rose leaned back in her chair and directed Caro as she took the things out of the trunks. The girl was fairly bewildered by what she saw—the laced chemises, the flounced petticoats, the dainty nightgowns with transparent necks. "But you'll show through," she said in tones of horror as she displayed one of these, and could not understand why Rose rolled in her chair with laughter.

There were little pots of cream and bottles of hair-lotion, there were ebony-backed brushes, patent leather shoes, kid gloves, all sorts of marvels which Caro had seen nowhere but in shops. As she unpacked she felt a kind of soreness in her heart. Why should Rose have all these beautiful things, these laces, these perfumes, these silks and ribbons, while Caro wore nothing but stuff and calico or smelt of anything sweeter than milk? As she glanced at Rose, leaning back in the most comfortable chair to be found in that uncomfortable room—the firelight dancing on the silken ripples of her gown, her neck and arms gleaming through clouds of lace—the soreness woke into a pain. Rose had something more even than silks and laces. She had love. It was love that made her hold her chin so proudly, it was love that made her cheeks flush and her eyes glow. And no one had ever loved Caro—she had never heard a man's voice in tenderness, or felt even so much as a man's hand fondle hers. . . .

"Caro, would you mind brushing my hair?"

Rose was taking out the pins, and curls and tendrils of hair began to fall on her shoulders. Caro took the brush, and swept it over the soft mass, gleaming like spun glass. A subtle perfume rose from it, the rub of

it on her hand was like silk. Rose's eyes closed as the brush stroked her, and her lips parted slowly into a smile.

Then suddenly, without warning, all this love and happiness and possession became too much for Caro—she dropped the brush and the scented hair, and burst into passionate tears.

§ 6.

Reuben at once laid out his wife's money to the best advantage. He bought twenty cows, good milkers, and started a dairy business in Rye. A shop was opened near the Landgate, which sold milk, butter, cream, and eggs from Odiam. He also tried to establish a milk-round in Rye, sending circulars to inns and private houses. He engaged a young woman to serve in the shop, and boys to drive his milk-carts. This meant a big expenditure, and almost all Rose's money was swallowed up by it.

Reuben was surprised at Lardner's attitude. The old man refused to look upon this spending of his niece's dowry as an excellent investment, which would soon bring in returns a hundredfold—he would have preferred to see her money lying safe and useless in Lewes Old Bank, and accused Backfield of greed and recklessness. Reuben in his turn was disgusted with Lardner's parsimony, and would have quarrelled with him had he not been afraid of an estrangement. The farmer of Starvecrow could not speak without all sorts of dreadful roars and clearings in his throat, and Reuben hopefully observed the progress of the cancer.

Rose herself did not much care how her money was spent as long as she had the things she wanted. First of these at present was Reuben's love, and that she had in plenty. She was a perpetual source of delight to him; her beauty, her astounding mixture of fire and innocence, her good humour, and her gaiety were even more intoxicating than before marriage. He felt that he had

found the ideal wife. As a woman she was perfect, so perfect that in her arms he could forget her shortcomings as a comrade. After all, what did it matter if she failed to plumb the depths of his desire for things outside herself, as long as she herself was an undying source of enchantment ?—smoothing away the wrinkles of his day with her caresses, giving him love where she could not give him understanding, her heart where she could not give her brain. During the hours of work and fret he would long for her, for the quiet warm evenings, and the comfort which the wordless contact of her brought. She made him forget his heaviness, and gather strength to meet his difficulties, giving him draughts of refreshment for to-morrow's journey in the desert.

His times were still anxious. Even if the milk-round turned out a success, it was bound to be a loss to him during the first year. A multiplication of servants also meant for a man like Reuben a multiplication of trials. He would have liked to do all the work himself, and could trust no one to do it properly for him. His underlings, with their detached attitude towards the farm, were a perpetual source of anxiety and contempt. His heart sickened for those stalwart sons he had dreamed of in the days of his first marriage—a dream which mocked him daily with its pitiful materialisation in the shred of family that still worked for Odiam. Reuben longed for Rose to have a child, but the months passed, and she had no favourable answer to his repeated questionings, which struck her at first as amusing, later as irritating, and at last—at the suggestion of one or two female friends—as indelicate.

She herself had no wish for motherhood, and expressed this so openly that in time Reuben began to entertain dark doubts of her, and to feel that she would avoid it if she could. Yet she in herself was so utterly sweet that he could not find it in his heart to be angry, or use anything but tender remonstrance when she vexed

him with her attitude towards life in general and marriage in particular.

She gulped at pleasure, and she gave him so much that he could not deny her what she craved for, though the mere decorativeness of her tastes amazed and sometimes appalled him. She coaxed him to buy her new curtains and chair-covers for the parlour, and to turn it into a room which could be used, where she could lounge in her pretty frocks, and entertain her women-friends—of whom she had a startling number—to afternoon tea, with cream, and little cakes that cost an amount of money altogether disproportionate to the space that they filled in one's inside. She demanded other entertainments too—visits to Rye, and even to Hastings, and jaunts to fairs other than the sanctioned one on Boarzell.

Reuben was delighted with her fashionable clothes, the dainty things with which she managed to surround herself, her fastidious care for her person, her pomadings, her soapings, her scentings—but he sometimes had vague doubts of this beautiful, extravagant, irresponsible creature. He was like a man stirring in a happy dream, realising in the midst of it that he dreams, and must some day awake.

§ 7.

The year '71 was on the whole a bad one. The summer was parched, the autumn sodden, and the winter frozen. Reuben's oats after some excellent promises failed him abruptly, as was the way with crops on Boarzell. His wheat was better in quality but poor in quantity, his mangolds had the rot, and his hops, except for the old field by the lane, were brown and ragged with blight.

This would have been bad enough in any year, but in times when he bore the burden of his yet profitless milk-round it was only a little short of catastrophe. Making every allowance for a first year, that milk-round had

disappointed him. He found private custom hard to win, and even the ceasing of French dairy supplies, owing to the Franco-Prussian war, did not bring him the relief he had hoped. One or two small farms on the borders of Rye catered in dairy stuff for its inhabitants, and he found them hard to outbid or outwit. Also, owing to the scarcity of grass feed, it was a bad milk year, and poor supplies were put down by consumers to the new milkman, and in more than one case custom was withdrawn.

Reuben faced his adversity with set teeth and a dogged countenance. He had not been farming thirty odd years to be beaten casually by the weather. Scorching heat and blighting cold, the still blanker doom of the trickling, pouring rain—the wind that seeded his corn, and beat down his hay, and flung his hop-bines together in muddled heaps—the pests that Nature breeds by the ten million out of her own putrefyings and misbegettings—all things in life from the lowest maggot to the fiercest storm—he was out to fight them. In challenging Boarzell he had challenged them all.

In time his struggle began to modify his relations with Rose. At first he had told himself that her uselessness was only apparent. Though she herself did no fighting, she gave such rest and refreshment to the soldier that he went forth strengthened to the war. He had almost begun to attribute to her his daily renewed courage, and had once or twice been moved to show his gratitude by acts of expensive indulgence.

Now slowly he began to see that this gratitude was misleading—better receive no comfort from Rose than pay for it too dear. He must make her understand that he could not afford to keep a useless and extravagant wife, however charming she might be. Rose must do her share, as Naomi had done, as his mother had done, as his children had done.

Sometimes he would expostulate with her, and when

she met his expostulations with blandishments, he would feel himself yielding, and grow so furious that he would turn upon her in rage and indignation. Rose was not like Naomi ; in her own words " she gave as good as she got," and once or twice, for the first time in his life, Reuben found himself in loud and vulgar altercation with a female. He had never before had a woman stand up to him, and the experience was humiliating.

He had used to turn from Boarzell to her for rest, and now he found himself turning from her to Boarzell. It was part of the baffling paradox that the thing he fought should also be the thing he loved, and the battle-field his refuge. Out on the Moor, with the south-west wind rolling over him like the waves of some huge earth-scented sea, he drank in the spirit of conflict, he was swept back into the cleanness and singleness of his warfare. It was then that Boarzell nerved him for its own subduing, stripped his heart of softness, cleansed it of domestic fret. Rose and her love and sweetness were all very well, but he was out for something greater than Rose—he must keep in mind that she was only a part of things. Why, he himself was only a part of things, and in his cravings and softenings must be conquered and brushed aside even as Rose. In challenging Boarzell he had challenged the secret forces of his own body, all the riot of hope and weakness and desire that go to make a man. The battle was not to be won except over the heaped bodies of the slain, and on the summit of the heap would lie his own.

§ 8.

The last piece of land had been exceptionally tough even for Boarzell. It was a high strip, running right across the Moor from the edge of the twenty-acre piece acquired in '67, over the high-road, to the borders of Doozes. The soil was amazingly various—it started in

the low grounds almost as clay, with runnels of red water in the irrigation ditches, then passing through a stratum of marl it became limish, grey and brittle, powdering under the spade. Reuben's ploughs tore over it, turning up earth of almost every consistency and colour, till the new ground looked like a smeared palette. Towards Doozes it became clay again, and here oats would grow, sedge-leaved and tulip-rooted, with puffy awns. On the crest was rubble, poor stuff where even the heather seemed to fight for existence.

Reuben struggled untiringly—he tried manure as in his first enterprising days, and a horrible stink of guano told traffic on the road it was passing through Odiam territory. Spades and ploughshares and harrows scored and pulped the earth. Sometimes with breaking back and aching head, the sweat streaming over his skin, he would lift himself stiffly from the plough-handles, and shake his fist at the desert round him. He had never had such a tussle before, and put it down to the fact that he was now for the first time on the high ground, on the hard and sterile scab of the marl, where it seemed as if only gorse would grow. He felt as if now for the first time he was fighting against odds, his earlier struggles were tame compared with this.

Often in the evenings, when the exhausting work of the day was done, he would wander out on the Moor, seeking as usual rest on the field of his labours. The tuft of firs would grow black and featureless against the dimming sky, and stars would hang pale lamps above the fog, which smoked round Boarzell, veiling the fields, till it seemed as if he stood alone on some desert island, in the midst of a shoreless sea. All sounds would be muffled, lights and shadows would blur, and he would be alone with the fir-clump and the stars and the strong smells of his land.

He would wait there till the dew hung in pearls on his clothes and hair, and the damp chills of the night were

in his bones. Then he would creep down from the Moor, and go back into the warmth and love of the house—yet with this difference now, that he never quite forgot.

He would wake during the night after cruel dreams of Boarzell stripped of its tilth, relapsed into wildness; for a few agonised moments he would wonder if the dream were true, and if he had not indeed failed. Sometimes he had to get out of bed and steal to the window, to reassure himself with the sight of his diggings and fencings. Then a horrible thought would attack him, that though he had not yet actually failed, he was bound to fail soon, that his task was too much for him, and only one end possible. He would creep back into bed, and lie awake till dawn and the restarting of the wheel.

One comfort was that these evil summers had blighted Grandturzel too. Realf's fruit and grain had both done badly, and he had been unfortunate with his cows, two of which had died of garget. It was now that the characters of the two rivals were contrasted. Realf submitted at once to adversity, cut down his expenses, and practically withdrew from the fight. Ambitious and enterprising when times were good, he was not the man to be still ambitious and enterprising when they were bad. The greatness of his farm was not so much to him as the comfort of his family. He now had a little son, and was anxious that neither he nor Tilly should suffer from bad speculations. He despised Reuben for putting Odiam before his wife and children, and defying adversity at the expense of his household.

"He'll do fur himself," he said to Tilly, as he watched her bath the baby before the fire, "and where'll his old farm be then?"

"He's more likely to do fur someone else," said Tilly, who knew her father.

"Wot about this gal he's married?"

"I'm sorry fur her."

"But she döan't look as if she wanted it, surelye. I never see anything so smart and well-set-up as she wur in church last Sunday."

"Still, I'm sorry fur her—I'm sorry fur any woman as he takes up with. Now, Henry, you can't kiss baby while I'm bathing him."

It sometimes grieved Tilly that she could not do more for her brothers and sister. Pete did not want her help, being quite happy in his work on the farm. But Jemmy and Caro hated their bondage, and she wished she could set them free. Reuben had sternly forbidden his children to have anything to do with the recreant sister, but they occasionally met on the road, or on the footpath across Boarzell. Once Caro had stolen a visit to Grandturzel, and held the baby in her arms, and watched her sister put him to bed; but she was far too frightened of Reuben to come again.

On Reuben's marriage Tilly had hoped that Rose might do something for Caro, and indeed the girl had lately seemed to have a few more treats and pleasures in her life; but from what she had heard and from what she saw, the younger sister was afraid that Rose's good offices were not likely to make for Caro's ultimate happiness. Then comfortable little Tilly would sigh in the midst of her own, and wish that everyone could have what she had been given.

Benjamin occasionally stole afternoons in Rye—if he was discovered there would be furious scenes with Reuben, but he had learned cunning, and also, being of a sporting nature, was willing to take risks. Some friends of his were building a ship down at the Camber. Week by week he watched her grow, watched the good timber fill in her ribs, watched her decks spread themselves, watched her masts rise, and at last smelt the good smell of her tarring. She was a three-masted schooner, and her first voyage was to be to the Canaries. Her builders drank many a toast with Backfield's

truant son, who gladly risked his father's blows to be with them in their work and hearty boozing. He forgot the farmyard smells he hated in the shipyard smells he loved, and his slavery in oaths and rum—with buckets of tar and coils of rope, and rousing chanties and stories of strange ships.

Next spring the news came to Odiam that Benjamin had run away to sea.

§ 9.

It was Rose who had to tell Reuben.

Benjamin had given no one the faintest hint of his plans; indeed for the last two or three weeks his behaviour had been unusually good. Then one morning, when Reuben was at Robertsbridge market, he disappeared —Handshut could not find him to take his place in the lambing shed. Rose was angry, for she had wanted young Handshut to hang some curtains for her—one cause of disagreement between her and Reuben was her habit of coaxing the farm-hands to do odd jobs about the house.

That same evening, before her husband was back, a letter came for Rose. It was from Benjamin at Rye, announcing that he was sailing that night in the *Rother Lady* for Las Palmas. He was sick of the farm, and could not stand it any longer. Would Rose tell his father?

Rose was not sorry to see the last of Benjamin, whom she had always despised as a coarse lumpkinish youth, whose clothes smelt strongly either of pitch or manure. But she dreaded breaking the news to Reuben. She disliked her husband's rages, and now she would have to let one loose. Then suddenly she thought of something, and a little smile dimpled the corners of her mouth.

Reuben came in tired after a day's prodding and bargaining in Robertsbridge market-place. Rose, like

a wise woman, gave him his supper, and then, still wise, came and sat on his knee.

"Ben . . ."

"Well, liddle Rose."

"I've some bad news for you."

"Wot?"

"Jemmy's gone for a sailor."

He suddenly thrust her from him, and the lines which had begun to soften on his face as he held her, reappeared in their old harshness and weariness.

"Gone!"

"Yes. I had a letter from him this evening. He couldn't stand Odiam any longer, so he ran away. He's sailed for a place called Palma."

Reuben did not speak. His hands were clenched on the arms of his chair, and for the first time Rose noticed that he looked old. A faint feeling of disgust came over her. She shivered, and took a step backwards as if she would leave him. Then her warm good nature and her gratitude to the man who had made her so happy, drove away the unnatural mood. She came close, and slipped her soft arms round his neck, pressing her lips to his.

He groaned.

"You mustn't fret, Reuben."

"How can I help it?—they're all gone now save one . . . my boys. . . ."

"Perhaps there'll be others."

She had slid back to his knee, and the weight and warmth of her comforted him a little. He lifted his head quickly at her words.

"Others?"

"Yes, why not?"

Her bold sweet eyes were looking into his and her mouth was curved like a heart.

"Rose, Rose—my dear, my liddle dear—you döan't mean——"

"Of course I mean. You needn't look so surprised. Such a thing has been known to happen."

"Döan't go laughing at me, but tell me—when?"

"In October."

"Oh, God! oh, God!"

His rapture and excitement alarmed her. His eyes blazed—he threw back his head and laughed in ecstasy. Then he seized her, and crumpled her to him, covering her face, her neck, her hair, her ears, with kisses, murmuring broken phrases of adoration and gratitude.

Rose was definitely frightened, and broke free with some violence.

"Oh, stop it, Ben! can't you see you're spoiling my dress? Why should you get in such a taking? You've had children before, and they've all been failures—I expect this one will only be like the rest."

§ 10.

Rose's child was born towards the end of October. Once more Reuben had a son, and as he looked down on the little red hairless thing all his hopes and dreams were built anew. He had always lived too near the earth to let experience thump him into cynicism. He raised as glorious dreams over this baby as he had raised over the others, and seen crumble into ashes. Indeed, the fact that his earlier hopes had failed made him warm himself more gratefully at this rekindling. He saw himself at last raised out of the pit of difficulty—he would not lose this boy as he had lost the others, he would perhaps be softer and more indulgent, he would at all events be wiser, and the child should indeed be a son to him and to Odiam. "Unto Us—Reuben and Odiam—a child is born; unto Us a son is given."

He was soon confirmed in his idea that the birth had brought him luck. Before little David was a week old, the welcome news came that Lardner had died. For

some time he had been able to swallow only milk food, and his speech had been reduced to a confused roaring, but his death at this juncture seemed to Reuben a happy coincidence, an omen of good fortune for himself and his son.

He was so pleased that he forgot to veil his pleasure before Rose, whose grief reminded him of the fact that Lardner was a near and dear relation, whose death must be looked upon as a chastisement from heaven. In a fit of compunction for his behaviour, he ordered a complete suit of mourning, in which he attended the funeral. He was soft and benign to all men now, and soothed Rose's ruffled spirit by showing himself to her in all the glory of a top-hat with crape weepers before setting out for Starvecrow.

He himself had helped plan the obsequies, which were carried out with all possible pomp by a Rye undertaker. After the ceremony there was a funeral meal at Starvecrow, where sedate joints and solemn whiskies were partaken of in the right spirit by the dozen or so men and women who were privileged to hear old Lardner's will. This was read by the deceased's lawyer, and one or two pleased malicious glances were darted at Reuben from under decorously lowered lids. He sat with his fists doubled upon his knees, hearing as if in a nightmare:

"I bequeath the farm of Starvecrow, with all lands, stock, and tools pertaining thereto, also the house and fixtures, together with seven thousand pounds to Henry Robert Crick of Lone Mills, Ontario, Canada, my dear son by Marion Crick. . . . My household furniture and fifty pounds free of legacy duty I bequeath to my niece, Rose Backfield, wife of Reuben Backfield of Odiam."

Reuben felt dazed and sick, the solemn faces of the

mourners seemed to leer at him, he was seized by a contemptuous hatred of his kind. There was some confused buzzing talk, but he did not join in it. He shook hands deliriously with the lawyer, muttered something about having to get back, and elbowed his way out of the room. Pete had driven over to fetch him in his gig, as befitted the dignity of a yeoman farmer and nephew-by-marriage of the deceased, but Reuben angrily bade him go home alone. He could not sit still, he must walk, stride off his fury, the frenzy of rage and disgust and disappointment that consumed him.

What business had old Lardner to have a natural son? Never had the laws of morality seemed to Reuben so august and necessary as then, or their infringement more contemptible. He was filled with a righteous loathing of this crapulous libertine who perpetuated the vileness of some low intrigue by bequeathing his worldly goods to his bastard. Meantime his virtuously married niece was put off with fifty pounds and some trashy furniture. Reuben fairly grovelled before the seventh commandment that afternoon.

He staggered blindly along the road. His head swam with rage, and also, it must be confessed, with something else—for he was not used to drinking whisky, which some obscure local tradition considered the only decent beverage at funerals. His face was flushed, and every now and then something would be whirled round by the wind and whip his cheeks and blind him momentarily in a black cloud. At first he was too confused to grapple with it, but when two long black arms suddenly wound themselves about his neck, nearly choking him, he remembered his hat with the crape weepers, and his rage from red-hot became white-hot and cinerating. He tore off the hat with its long black tails, and flung it into the ditch with a volley of those emasculate oaths which are all the swearing of a Sussex man.

Afterwards he felt better, but he was still fuming

when he came to Odiam, and dashed up straight to Rose's bedroom, where she lay with the ten-days-old David and a female friend from Rye, who had come in to hear details about her confinement. Both, not to say all three, were startled by Reuben's sudden entrance, crimson and hatless, his collar flying, the dust all over him.

"Here! Wot d'you think?" he shouted; "if that old man äun't left all his money to a bastard."

"Don't be so excited, Ben," said Rose; "you've no business to come bursting in here like this."

"Remember your wife's delicate," said the lady friend.

"Well, wot I want to know is why you dudn't tell me all this afore."

"How could I? I didn't know how uncle was going to leave his money."

"You might have found out, and not let me in fur all this. Here I've bin and gone and spent all your settlements on a milk-round, which I'd never have done if I hadn't thought summat more 'ud be coming in later."

"Well, I can't help it. I expect that as uncle knew I was well provided for, married and settled and all that, he thought he'd rather leave his stuff to someone who wasn't."

"I like that—and you the most expensive woman to keep as ever was."

"Hold your tongue, Ben. I'm surprised at you."

"I justabout will speak. A purty mess you've got me into. You ought to have told me before we married as he had a son out in Canada."

"I didn't know. This is the first I've heard of it. Anyhow, you surely don't mean to say you married me for my money."

"Well, I wouldn't have married you if you hadn't got none."

"For shame!" said the lady friend.

Rose burst into tears, and young David, interrupted

in the midst of an excellent meal, sent up a piercing wail.

"You'd better go downstairs till you know how to speak to your wife properly," said the female from Rye.

"My wife's deceived me!" shouted Reuben. "I made sure as she'd come in fur thousands of pounds when old Lardner died, and all she's got out of him is fifty pounds and his lousy furniture."

"Furniture?" said Rose, brisking up; "why from what you said I thought there was nothing. I could do with some furniture. I want a bedstead with brass knobs."

"Well, you shan't have it. I'll justabout sell the whole lot. You can't prevent me."

Rose's sobs burst forth afresh. Her friend ran up to her and took her in her arms, badly squeezing poor David, who became purple and entirely animal in his remonstrances.

Then the two women fairly stormed at Reuben. They told him he was a money-grubber, an unnatural father, that he had been drinking, that he ought to be ashamed of himself, that he had only got what he deserved. Reuben tried to stand up to them, but Rose had an amazing power of invective, and her friend, who was a spinster, but sometimes forgot it, filled in the few available pauses so effectively that in the end the wretched husband was driven from the room, feeling that the world held even worse things than wealthy and perfidious libertines.

§ II.

Of course there was a reconciliation. Such things had begun to loom rather large in Reuben's married life. He had never had reconciliations with Naomi—the storms had not been fierce enough to warrant a special celebration of the calms. But he and Rose were always being

reconciled. At first he had looked upon these episodes as sweets of matrimony, more blessed than any amount of honeymoon, but now he had gone a stage further and saw them merely as part of the domestic ritual—that very evening when he held Rose and the baby together in his big embrace he knew that in a day or two he would be staling the ceremony by another repetition.

He now began to crave for her active interest in his concerns. Hitherto he had not much missed it, it had been enough for him if when he came in tired and dispirited from his day's work, she had kissed him and rumpled back the hair from his forehead and called him her "poor old man." Her caresses and sympathy had filled the gap left by her help and understanding. But now he began to want something more. He saw the hollowness of her endearments, for she did nothing to make his burden lighter. She refused to realise the seriousness of his position—left stranded with an under taking which he would never have started if he had not been certain of increased capital in the near future. She was still extravagant and fond of pleasure, she either could not or would not master the principles of economy; she saw the fat lands of Odiam round her, and laughed at her husband when he told her that he was crippled with expenses, and in spite of crops and beasts and barns must live as if he were a poor man.

Of course, he had been rash—he saw now that he had been a fool to speculate with the future. But who could have foretold that heir of Lardner's?—no one had ever heard of him in Peasmarsh, and most people were as astonished as Reuben though not so disgusted. Sometimes he had an uneasy feeling that Lardner himself had not thought much about his distant son till a year or two ago. He remembered how the old man had disapproved of the way Rose's settlements were spent, and horrible conjectures would assail him that some earlier will had been revoked, and Rose disinherited because her

uncle did not wish to put more money into her husband's pocket.

After all, fifty pounds and some furniture was very little to leave his only niece, who had lived with him, and had been married from his house. It was nonsense to plead the excuse that she was comfortably settled and provided for—the old man knew that Backfield had made a desperate plunge and could not recoup himself properly without ready money. He must have drawn up his will in the spirit of malice—Reuben could imagine him grinning away in his grave. " Well, Ben Backfield, I've justabout sold you nicely, haven't I ?—next to no capital, tedious heavy expenses, and a wife who döan't know the difference between a shilling and a soverun. You thought you'd done yourself unaccountable well, old feller, I reckon. Now you've found out your mistake. And you can't git even wud me where I am. He ! He ! "

Reuben would imagine the corpse saying all sorts of insulting things to him, and he had horrible nightmares of its gibes and mockery. One night Rose woke in the dubious comfort of the new brass bed—which she had wheedled Reuben into sparing from the auction—to find her husband kneeling on his pillow and pinning some imaginary object against the wall while he shouted—" I've got you, you old grinning ghosty—now we'll see who's sold ! "

She thought this immensely funny, and retailed it with glee to her female friends who continued to invade the place. The multitude of these increased as time went by, for Rose had the knack of attaching women to herself by easy bonds. She was extremely confidential on intimate subjects, and she was interested in clothes—indeed in that matter she was even practical, and a vast amount of dressmaking was done on the kitchen table, much to the disorganisation of Caro's cooking.

Sometimes there would be males too, and Reuben

found that he could be jealous on occasion. It annoyed him to see a young counter-jumper from Rye sitting in the parlour with an unmanly tea-cup, and he would glare on such aristocracy as a bank-clerk or embryo civil servant, whose visits Rose considered lent a glamour to Odiam. Like a wise woman she used her husband's jealousy to her own advantage. She soon grew extremely skilful in manipulating it, and by its means wrung a good deal out of him which would not otherwise have been hers.

It was true that her young men were not always on the spot when she wanted them most, but on these occasions she used the drover Handshut, a comely, well-set-up young fellow, of independent manners. Reuben more than once had to drive him out of the kitchen.

"I wöan't have my lads fooling it in the house," he said to his wife, when he found her winding a skein of wool off Handshut's huge brown paws—"they've work enough to do outside wudout spannelling after you women."

Rose smiled to herself, and when she next had occasion to punish Reuben, invited his drover to a cup of tea.

Then there was an angry scene, stormings and tears, regrets, taunts, and abuse—and another reconciliation.

§ 12.

In time, as these battles became more usual, the family were forced to take sides. Peter supported Reuben, Caro supported Rose. There had been an odd kind of friendship between the downtrodden daughter and the gay wife ever since they had unpacked the latter's trunks together on her wedding night and Caro had cried because Rose had what she might never have.

Rose approved of this attitude—she liked to be envied; also Caro was useful to her in many ways, helping her

in the house, taking the burden of many irksome duties off her shoulders, leaving her free to entertain her friends or mix complexion washes. Moreover, there was something in Caro which appealed in itself, a certain heavy innocence which tickled the humour of the younger, more-experienced woman. Once her stepdaughter had asked her what it felt like to be kissed, which had sent Rose into rockings of laughter and a carnival of reminiscence. She liked to dazzle this elderly child with her "affairs," she liked to shock her a little too. She soon discovered that Caro was deeply scandalised at the thought of a married woman having men friends to visit her, so she encouraged the counter-jumpers and the clerks for Caro's benefit as well as Reuben's.

It never occurred to her to throw these young people together, and give the girl a chance of fighting her father and satisfying the vague longings for adventure and romance which had begun to put torment into her late twenties. She often told her it was a scandal that she had never been allowed to know men, but her own were too few and useful to be sacrificed to the forlorn. Besides, Caro had an odd shy way with men which sometimes made them laugh at her. She had little charm, and though not bad-looking in a heavy black-browed style, she had no feminine arts, and always appeared to the very worst advantage.

Those were not very good times for Caro. She envied Rose, and at the same time she loved her, as women will so often love those they envy. Rose's attitude was one of occasional enthusiasm and occasional neglect. Sometimes she would give her unexpected treats, make her presents of clothes, or take her to a fair or to see the shops; at others she would seem to forget all about her. She thought Caro a poor thing for not standing up to Reuben, and despised her for her lack of feminine wiles. At the same time she would often be extremely confidential, she would pour out stories of love and

kisses by moonlight, of ardent words, of worship, of ecstasy, and send Caro wandering over strange paths, asking strange questions of herself and fate, and sometimes—to the other's delight—of Rose.

"Wot do you do to make a man kiss you?"

"Oh, I dunno. I just look at him like this with my eyes half shut. Then if that isn't enough I part my lips—so."

The two women had been bathing. It was one of Rose's complaints that Odiam did not make enough provision for personal cleanliness in the way of baths and tubs. Reuben objected if she made the servant run up and downstairs ten times or so with jugs of hot water to fill a wash-tub in her bedroom—they had once had a battle royal about it, during which Rose had said some humorous things about her man's washing—so in summer she relieved the tension by bathing in the Glotten brook, where it ran temporarily limpid and reclused at the foot of the old hop-garden. She had persuaded Caro to join her in this adventure—according to her ideas it was not becoming for a woman to bathe alone; so Caro had conquered her objections to undressing behind a bush, and tasted for the first time the luxury of a daily, or all but daily, bath.

Now they were dry and dressed once more, all except their stockings, for Rose loved to splash her bare feet in the water—she adored the caress of water on her skin. It was a hot day, the sun blinked through the heavy green of the sallows, dabbling the stream with spots and ripples of light. June had come, with a thick swarthiness in the fields, and the scent of hayseed scorching into ripeness.

Rose leaned back against a trunk, a froth of fine linen round her knees. She splashed and kicked her feet in the stream.

"Yes—I've only to look at a man like this . . . and he always does it."

"But not now!" cried Caro.

"What do you mean by 'not now'?"

"Now you're married."

"Oh, no—I'm talking of before. All the same . . ."

"Wot!"

"Nothing. You'd be shocked."

Caro looked gloomily at the water. She did not like being told she would be shocked, though she knew she would be.

At that moment there was a sound of "git back" and "woa" beyond the hedge. The next minute two horses stepped into the Glotten just by the bend.

"That must be Handshut," said Rose.

It was. He came knee-deep into the water with the horses, and, not seeing the women, plunged his head into the cool reed-sweetened stickle.

"Take care—he'll see us!"—and Caro sharply gathered up her legs under her blue and red striped petticoat. Rose continued to dabble hers in the water, even after Handshut had lifted his head and looked in her direction.

"Rose!" cried Caro.

"Well, why shouldn't he see my legs? They're unaccountable nice ones."

"All the more reason——"

"Not at all, Miss Prude."

Caro went crimson to the roots of her hair, and began pulling on her stockings. Rose continued to splash her feet in the water, glancing sidelong at Handshut.

"He's a nice lad, ain't he?"

Caro vouchsafed no reply.

"Reuben knows he's a nice lad, and he knows I know he's a nice lad. Hasn't he got a lovely brown skin?"

"Hush."

But Rose was in a devilish mood.

"Look here," she said suddenly, "I'm going to prove

the truth of what I told you just now. I'm going to make that boy kiss me."

"Indeed you äun't."

"Yes I am. I'll go down and talk to him at the bend, and you can creep along and watch us through the hedge; and I'll shut my eyes and maybe part my lips, and he'll kiss me, you see if he don't."

"I won't see anything of the kind. I'm ashamed of you."

"Nonsense—it's only fun—we'll make a bet on it. If I fail, I'll give you my new white petticoat with the lace edging. And I'll allow myself ten minutes to do it in; that's quite fair, for it usually takes me longer."

"And what am I to give you if you succeed?"

"Nothing—the kiss'll be enough for me. I've been wanting to know what he was like to kiss for many a long day."

"Well, I'm justabout ashamed of you, and I wöan't have anything to do with it."

"You can keep out then."

"Wot if I tell fäather?"

"You wouldn't tell him—you wouldn't be such a sneak. After all, what's a man for, if it isn't to have a bit of fun with? I don't mean anything serious—it's just a joke."

"What'll Handshut think it?"

"Just a joke too. You're so glum, Caro—you take everything so seriously. There's nothing reälly serious in a kiss."

"Oh, äun't there!"

"No—it's just something one enjoys, same as cakes and bull's-eyes. I've kissed dozens of people in my time and meant nothing by it, nor they either. It's because you've no experience of these things that you think such a lot of 'em. They're quite unimportant really, and it's silly to make a fuss."

For some obscure reason Caro did not like to see her-

self credited with the harshness of inexperience. She did her best to assume an air of worldly toleration.

"Well, of course if it's only fun. . . . But fäather wudn't think it that."

"No, and I shouldn't like him to. You *are* funny, Caro. Don't watch me if you're shocked—you can know nothing about it, and then you won't be to blame, But I'm going to have my lark in spite of you."

"Put on your stockings first," said Caro sternly.

Rose made a face at her, but pulled on a pair of gauzy stockings, securing them with garters of pale blue ribbon. Then she scrambled to her feet and edged her way through the reeds and bushes to where young Handshut stood at the bend.

He was not visible from where Caro sat, for he had come out of the water, and for a minute or two she vowed that she would have nothing to do with Rose's disgraceful spree. But after a time her curiosity got the better of her. Would Rose be able to do as she said —persuade her husband's drover to kiss her, simply by looking at him through half-closed eyes? Of course Handshut was very forward, Caro told herself, she had often disliked his attitude towards his mistress—he would not want much encouragement. All the same she wanted to see if Rose succeeded, and if she succeeded—how. She craned her neck, but could see nothing till she had crept a few yards through the reeds. Then she saw Rose and Handshut sitting just beyond the hedge, by the water's rim.

The horses were drowsing in the stream, flicking at the flies with their tails. Rose's dress made a brave blue splash against the green, and the gold-flecked chestnut of her hair was very close to Handshut's brown curls. Caro could dimly hear their voices, though she could not distinguish what they said. Five minutes had passed, and still, though close, there was a decent space between them. Then there was a little lull in the flow of talk.

They were looking at each other. Caro crept nearer, something like a hot cinder in her heart.

They were still looking at each other. Then Handshut began to speak in a lower voice than usual; he stopped—and suddenly their heads stooped together, the gold and the brown touched, mingled, lingered, then drew slowly apart.

Caro sprang to her feet. The couple in the field had risen too, but they did not see her through the hedge. Her heart beat fiercely with an uncontrollable anger. She could have shouted, screamed at them—at her rather, this gay, comfortable, plump, spoilt wife, who had so many kisses that she could look upon one more or less as fun.

Rose's merry, rather strident laugh rang out on the hushed noon. Handshut stood facing her with his head held down; then she turned away from him and laughed again. Her laugh rose, fluttered—then suddenly broke. It snapped like a broken knife. She turned back towards Handshut, and they faced each other once more. Then Caro saw a strange and rather terrible thing. She saw those two who had kissed for fun stumble together in an embrace which was not for fun at all, and kiss with kisses that were closer to tears than laughter.

§ 13.

There was a convention of silence between Caro and Rose. From that day forward neither made any allusion to the escapade which had ended so unexpectedly. At the same time it was from the other's silence that each learned most; for Caro knew that if her eyes had deceived her and that last kiss been like the first, for fun, Rose would have spoken of it—while Rose knew that Caro had seen the transmutation of her jok into earnest, because if she had not she would have been full of comments, questions, and scoldings.

Sometimes Caro in her innocence would think that she ought to speak to Rose, warn her, and plead with her to go carefully. But a vague fright sealed her lips, and she was held at a distance by the reserve in which the merry communicative Rose had suddenly wrapped herself. Those few minutes by the brookside had changed her, though it would be hard to say exactly in what the change lay. Caro was both repelled and baffled by it. A more skilled observer would say that Rose had become suddenly adult in her outlook as well as her emotions. For the first time she had seen in its sorrowful reality the force which she had played with for so many years. The shock disorganised her, drove her into a strange silence. Love and she had always been hail-fellow-well-met, they had romped and rollicked together through life ; she had never thought that her good comrade could change, or rather—more unimaginable still—that she should suddenly discover that she had never really known him.

She was sobered. Her attitude towards things insensibly altered—to her husband, her child, her servants she was different, and yet in such a manner that none could possibly lay hands on the difference. Reuben's jealousies and suspicions were increased. She avoided Handshut, and she flourished the shopmen and clerks but feebly, yet he mistrusted her in a way he had never done when her enthusiasms were flagrant. This was not due to any psychological deduction, rather to a vague kind of guess, an intuition, an uneasiness that communicated itself from her to him.

Rose had begun to question her attitude towards her husband. She had hitherto never doubted for a moment that she loved him—of course she loved him ! But now she asked herself—" If I love him, how is it that our most tender moments have never meant so much to me as that second kiss of Handshut's ? " None of Reuben's kisses stood out in her memory as that kiss,

he had never made the thrill of life go through her, he had never filled her heart to bursting with joy so infinite that it was sorrow, and sorrow so exquisite that it was joy. She would observe Reuben, and she would see him —old. He was fifty-four, and his hair was grey ; there were crow's-feet at the corners of his eyes, and straight lines between his brows, where he had furrowed them as the pitiless sun beat down upon his face. There were other lines too, seamed and scored by hard struggles. He was strong as an ox, but she told herself he was beginning to move a bit stiffly. He had exposed himself so ruthlessly to the wet and cold that his joints had become rheumatic. It was nothing very much, but he liked to have her rub them occasionally, and up till then she had liked it too. Now she suddenly saw something dreary and preposterous in it—here she was married to a man thirty years older than herself, his chattel, his slave. She did not really love him—how could she, with all those years between them ? She was fond of him, that was all—and he was getting older, and horribly cantankerous ; and she was young—oh, God ! she had never known till then how young.

Then suddenly it all changed. One day she found herself alone with Handshut—and nothing happened. His manner was quite that of the respectful servant towards his mistress, he made no allusion to the scene by the brook, spoke entirely of indifferent things. And she, she herself—that was the biggest, best surprise of all—did not feel the slightest embarrassment, or the slightest pang. On the contrary, all the passion which had scorched and withered her heart since the day of the kiss, seemed to die away, leaving her the old Rose, gay, confident, and at peace with all men.

She had been a fool—she had brooded over a little trivial incident till it had assumed unwarranted proportions and frightened her. Nothing whatever had happened to her and Handshut—they had shared a joke,

that was all. She did not love him, she loved her husband, and she was a fool to have thought anything else. Love was not a drama or a tragedy, but a game and a lark, or at times a comfortable emotion towards one's lawful husband, who was the best and finest man in the world.

The joy of this discovery quite restored Rose, and she flirted with Handshut so outrageously in front of Reuben, that afterwards they had one of the biggest quarrels of their lives.

§ 14.

'Seventy-four was another bad year for Odiam, and it was more hopeless than its predecessors, for Reuben had now no expectations to sustain him. His position was really becoming serious. In '68 he had bought more land than he could afford, for fear that Grandturzel would buy it if he did not, and in '71 he had started his accursed milk-round, which had proved nothing but an expense and a failure. He still clung to it, for the shop by the Landgate gave him prestige, and he had always hoped that affairs would mend, but he was gradually coming to realise that prestige can be bought too dear, and that his affairs were too heavily clogged to improve of their own accord.

He must take steps, he must make some sacrifice. He resolved to sell the milk-round. It was either that or a mortgage, and a mortgage was far the greater ignominy. After all he had not had the round more than two or three years, it had never flourished, and the parting wrench would not be a bad one. Of course his reputation would suffer, but hard cash was at the present moment more valuable than reputation.

Unfortunately it was also more difficult to get. Those years had been bad for everybody, and none of the surrounding farmers seemed disposed to add to his burdens by so uncertain a deal. If the thing had not

thriven with Backfield it was not likely to thrive with anyone else. For the first time Reuben cursed his own renown.

However, he hoped better things from the next spring. If lambing was good and the season promising, farmers would not be so cautious. Meantime he would keep Odiam in chains, he would save every penny, skim, pare, retrench, and learn the lesson of his lean years.

Unfortunately he had reckoned without Rose—Rose saw no need for such drastic measures. Because her man had been venturesome and stupid, made rash speculations, and counted on a quite unwarranted legacy, that was no reason for her to go without her new spring gown or new covers for her parlour chairs. She was once more expecting motherhood, and considered that as a reward for such self-sacrifice the most expensive luxuries were inadequate.

At the same time, feeling quite at ease about herself and Handshut, she led Reuben a freakish dance of jealousy, going to extravagant lengths in the hope of breaking down his resistance and goading him into compliance. But she did not find jealousy such a good weapon as it had used to be. Reuben would grow furious, thundery and abusive, but she never caught him, as formerly, in the softness of reaction, nor did the fear of a rival stimulate any more profitable emotion than rage.

The truth was that Reuben had now become desperate. He could not give in to Rose. If he sacrificed his farm to her in the smallest degree he ran the risk of ruin. He was torn in two by the most powerful forces of his life. On one side stood Odiam, trembling on the verge of catastrophe, needing every effort, every sacrifice of his, every drop of his sweat, every drop of his blood. On the other stood Rose, the dearest human thing, who demanded that for her sake he should forget his farm and the hopes bound up in it. He would not do so—

and at the same time he would not lose Rose. Though her love no longer gave him the gift of peace, he still clung to it; her presence, her voice, her touch, still fired and exalted him. He would not let her go—and he would not let Odiam go.

The struggle was terrible; it wore him out. He fought it desperately—to neither side would he surrender an inch. Sometimes with Rose's arms about him, her soft cheek against his and her perfidy forgotten, he would be on the brink of giving her the pretty costly thing, whatever it was, that she wanted at the expense of Odiam. At others, out in his fields, or on the slope of Boarzell—half wild, half tamed—with all those unconquered regions swelling above him, he would feel that he could almost gladly lose Rose altogether, if to keep her meant the sacrifice of one jot of his ambition, one tittle of his hope. Then he would go home, and find her ogling Handshut through the window, or giving tea in her most seductive manner to some young idiot with clean hands—and round would go the wheel again—round and round. . . .

As a matter of fact he had never been so secure of Rose as then; the very shamelessness of her flirtations was a proof of it—a whoop of joy, so to speak, at finding herself free of what she had feared would be a devastating passion. But who could expect Reuben to guess that? He saw only the freak of a treacherous nature, turning from him to men younger and more compliant than himself. Jealousy, from a fit, became a habit. He grew restless and miserable—he would run in suddenly from his work to see what his wife was doing, he would cross-examine Caro, he would even ask Pete to keep an eye on her. Sometimes he thought of dismissing Handshut, but the lad was an excellent drover, and Reuben had bursts of sanity in which he saw the foolishness of such a sacrifice. Rose flirted nowadays with every man she met—she was, he told himself furiously, a thoroughly

light and good-for-nothing girl—she was not worth the loss of a fellow like Handshut.

Thus the days dragged on wretchedly for everyone except Rose, and in time they grew wretched for her too. She began to tire of the cracklings of the flame she had kindled, of Reuben's continued distrust and suspicion, of Caro's goggle-eyed disapproval, of Peter's spying contempt. The time of her lying-in drew nearer, she had to give up her gay doings, and felt frightened and alone. Everyone was against her, everyone disapproved of her. She began to wish that she had not found her love for Handshut to be an illusion, to wish that the kiss beside the Glotten brook had been in reality what she had dreamed it. . . . . After all, is it not better to embrace the god and die than to go through the unhappy days in darkness?

§ 15.

One evening when Reuben was out inspecting a sick cow, Rose lay on the sofa languidly shelling peas. Once more it was June, and a rusty heat was outside blurring the orchard. Her fingers often lay idle in the bowl of peas, for though her task relieved the sweltering boredom which had weighed on her all day, every now and then a great lassitude would sweep over her, slacking her muscles, slacking her thoughts, till she drooped into a vague stagnation of sorrow.

She felt horribly, uselessly tired, her gay spirits had trickled from her in sheer physical discomfort, and in her heart an insistent question writhed like a little flame.

Two tears formed slowly in the corners of her eyes, welled at last over the silky, spidery lashes, and rolled down her cheeks. In themselves they were portents—for Rose hardly ever cried. More wonderful still, she did not know that she was crying, she merely became

stupidly conscious of a smudging of those motionless trees beyond the garden, and a washing of the hard, copper-coloured sky.

She feebly put up her hand and brushed the veil away —already something strange had loomed through it, whipping her curiosity. A man was at the window, his head and shoulders dark against the sunset.

"Handshut!"

"Yes, ma'am."

She frowned, for she seemed to catch a ring of mockery in the respectful words. She wondered if it had always been there.

"Where's master?"

"In the shed with Brindle."

"And how is she?"

"I dunno—we've sent for the veterinary."

There was silence. Outside the flowers rustled in the slow hot breeze. The background of trees was growing dim, a web of shadow at the foot of the garden.

Handshut still leaned on the sill, and she realised that if his words were decorous, his attitude was not. Surely he had something better to do than hang in at her window. Half his face was in shadow, half was reddened by the smouldering sky—it was the face of a young gipsy, brown, sullen, and mocking. She suddenly pulled herself into a sitting posture.

"What are you staying for?—I reckon the master wants you."

"No—it's you that wants me, surelye."

The blood ebbed from her lips. She felt afraid, and yet glad. Then suddenly she realised what was happening and dragged herself back into dignity and anger.

"I don't want you."

"Yes you do."

"Kindly go at once, or I shall call someone."

"Rose!"

Once more she fell back into her state of terror and

delight. His coolness seemed to paralyse her—she could not act. She could only lie and watch him, trembling. Why had he changed so?—he, who had never faltered in his attitude of stiff respect under her most outrageous and flirtatious digs.

"Rose," he said again, and his voice quivered as he said it, "you do want me a liddle bit now."

"What—what makes you think so?"

He shrugged his shoulders—there must have been some foreign streak in his yokel's blood.

"I döan't think it—I know. A year agone you dudn't want me, so I kipt back, I wurn't a-going to mäake you suffer. You wur frightened of that kiss. . . ."

He had spoken it—her terror. "Don't!" she cried.

"You wur frightened, so I saw you wurn't ready, and I tried to mäake you feel as naun had happened."

"Yes, I thought you were a gentleman," she said with a sudden rap of anger.

"I äun't that. I'm just a poor labouring man, wot loves you, and wot you love."

She tried to speak, but the words burnt up in her mouth.

"And a labouring man you love's worth more than a mäaster you döan't love, I reckon."

She shrank back on the sofa, folding her arms over her breast and gripping her shoulders.

"You needn't look so frightened. I'm only saying it. It wöan't mäake no difference—unless you want it to."

"How dare you speak to me like this?"

"Because I see you're justabout miserable, and I thought I'd say as how I'm beside you—only that."

"How—how d'you know I'm miserable?"

"Plain enough."

The sky had faded behind him and a crimson moon looked over his shoulder.

"Plain enough," he repeated, "but you needn't be

scared. I'll do naun you döan't want ; I'll come no nearer you than I am now—unless you call me."

She burst into tears.

He did not move. His head and shoulders were now nothing but a dark block against the purple and blue of the sky. The moon hung just above him like a copper dish.

" Döan't cry," he said slowly—" I'm only looking in at the window."

She struggled to her feet, sobs shaking and tearing her, and stumbled through the darkness to the door. Still sobbing she dragged herself upstairs, clinging to the rail, and every now and then stopping and bending double. Her loud sobs rang through the house, and soon the womenfolk were about her, questioning her, soothing her, and in the end putting her, still weeping, to bed. While outside in the barn Reuben watched in agony beside a sick cow.

§ 16.

When late the next morning a woman ran out of the house into the cow-stable, and told Reuben that his wife had given him a fine boy, he merely groaned and shook his head.

He sat on a stool at the foot of Brindle's stall, and watched her as she lay there, slobbering her straw. His face was grim and furrowed, lines scored it from nose to mouth and across the forehead ; his hair was damp and rough on his temples, his eyes were dull with sleeplessness.

" Wöan't yer have summat t'eat, mäaster ? " asked Beatup, looking in.

All Reuben said was :

" Has the Inspector come ? "

" No, mäaster—I'll bring him räound soon as he does. Wöan't you have a bite o' cheese if I fetch it ? "

Reuben shook his head.

" Mäaster——" continued the man after a pause.

" Well ? "

" I hear as how it's a liddle son. . . ."

Reuben mumbled something inarticulate, and Beatup took himself off. His master's head fell between his clenched hands, and as the cow gave a sudden slavering cough in the straw, a shudder passed over his skin, and he hunched himself more despairingly.

Odiam had triumphed at last. Just when Reuben's unsettled allegiance should have been given entirely to the wife who had borne him a son, his farm had suddenly snatched from him all his thought, all his care, his love, and his anxiety, all that should have been hers. It seemed almost as if some malignant spirit had controlled events, and for Rose's stroke prepared a counter-stroke that should effectually drive her off the field. The same evening that Rose had gone weeping and shuddering upstairs, Reuben had interviewed the vet. from Rye and heard him say " excema epizootica." This had not conveyed much, so the vet. had translated brutally :

" Foot-and-mouth disease."

The most awful of a farmer's dooms had fallen on Reuben. The new Contagious Diseases of Animals Act made it more than probable that all his herd would have to be slaughtered. Of course, there would be a certain amount of compensation, but government compensation was never adequate, and with the multitudinous expenses of disinfecting and cleansing he was likely to sustain some crippling losses, just when every penny was vital to Odiam. He knew of a man who had been ruined by an outbreak of pleuro-pneumonia, of another who had been forced by swine-fever to sell half his farm. Besides, any hope of a deal over his milk-round was now at an end. His dairy business, whether in town or country, was destroyed, and his reputation would be

probably as unjustly damaged, so that he would not be able to adventure on that road for years—perhaps never again.

Small wonder, then, that the birth of a son brought no joy. The child was born to an inheritance of shame, the heir of disaster. Reuben's head bowed nearly to his knees. He felt old and broken. He began to see that it was indeed dreadfully possible that he had thriven all these years, conquered waste lands, and enriched fat lands, only to be overthrown at last by a mere arbitrary piece of ill-luck. How the disease had broken out he could not tell—he had bought no foreign cattle, indeed recently he had bought no cattle at all. He could not blame himself in the smallest degree; it was just a malignant capricious thrust—as if fate had wanted to show him that what had taken him years of labour and battle and sacrifice to build up, could be destroyed in as many days.

A little hope sustained him till the Inspector's visit—the vet. might have been mistaken, the Inspector might not order a wholesale destruction. But these faint sparks were soon extinguished. The loathed epidemic had undoubtedly lifted up its head at Odiam, and Reuben's entire herd of Jersey, Welsh, and Sussex cattle was doomed to slaughter.

The next few days were like a horrible jumbled nightmare, something malignant, preposterous, outside experience. Three men came over from the slaughter-house at Rye, and plied their dreadful work till evening. The grey and dun-coloured Jerseys with their mild, protruding eyes, the sturdy Welsh with their little lumpy horns, the Sussex all coloured like a home-county landscape in reds and greys and browns—bowed their meek heads under the ox-killer, and became mere masses of meat and horn and hide. Profitless masses, too, for all the carcases were ordered to be burned.

The nightmare had its appropriate ending. Sixty

dead beasts were burned in lime. Boarzell became Hinnom—it was the most convenient open space, so Reuben's herd was burned on it. From a dozen different pyres streamers of white smoke flew along the wind, and a strange terrible smell and tickling of the nostrils troubled the labourer on the westward lands by Flightshot or Moor's Cottage.

The neighbourhood sat up in thrilled dismay, and watched Odiam pass through its hour. The farm was shut off from civilisation by a barrier of lime—along every road that flanked it, outside every gate that opened on it, the stuff of fiery purification was spread. The fields with their ripening oats and delicately browned wheat, the orchards where apples trailed the boughs into the grass, the snug red house, and red and brown barns, the black turrets of the oasts, all cried "Unclean! Unclean!"

Odiam was a leper. None might leave it without rubbing his boots in lime, no beasts could be driven beyond its hedges. More, the curse afflicted the guiltless —the markets at Rye and Battle were forbidden, the movements of cattle were restricted, and Coalbran once indignantly showed Reuben a certificate which he found he must have ready to produce every time he moved his single cow across the lane from the hedge pasture to the stream fallow.

Public opinion was against Backfield, and blamed him surlily for the local inconvenience.

"Döan't tell me," said Coalbran in the bar, "as it wurn't his fault. Foot-and-mouth can't just drop from heaven. He must have bought some furriners, and they've carried it wud 'em, surelye."

"Serve un right," said Ticehurst.

"Still, I'm sorry for him," said Realf of Grandturzel—"he's the only man hereabouts wot's really made a serious business of farming, and it's a shame he should get busted."

"He äun't busted yet," said Coalbran.

"But you mark my words, he will be," said Ticehurst; "anyways I shud lik him to be, fur he's a high-stomached man, and only deserves to be put down."

"He's down enough now, surelye! I saw him only yesterday by the Glotten meadows, and there was a look in his eye as I'll never forget."

"And yit he's as proud as the Old Un himself. I met him on Thursday, and I told him how unaccountable sorry we all wur fur him, and he jest spat."

"I offered to help him wud his burning," said Realf, "and he said as he'd see me and my lousy farm burnt first."

"He's a tedious contradictious old feller—he desarves all he's got. Let's git up a subscription fur him—that ud cut him to the heart, and he wudn't täake it, so it ud cost us naun, nuther."

The rest of the bar seemed to think, however, that Reuben might take the money out of spite, so Coalbran's charitable suggestion collapsed for lack of support.

Meantime, so fast bound in the iron of his misery that he scarcely felt the prick of tongues, Reuben lived through the final stages of his nightmare—those final stages of shock and upheaval when the fiery torment of the dream dies down into the ashes of waking. He wandered over his land in his lime-caked boots, scarcely talking to those at work on it, directing with mere mechanical activity the labour which now seemed to him nothing but the writhings of a crushed beetle. Everyone felt a little afraid of him, everyone avoided him as much as possible—he was alone.

His nostrils were always full of the smart of lime, and the stench of those horrible furnaces belching away on the slopes of the Moor. Would that burning never be done? For days the yellowy white pennons of destruction had flown on Boarzell, and that acrid reek polluted

the harvest wind. Boarzell was nothing but a huge funeral pyre, a smoking hell. . . . " And the smoke of her went up for ever and ever."

§ 17.

An atmosphere of gloom lay over Odiam ; Reuben brought it with him wherever he went, and fogged the house with it as well as the barns. Even Rose felt an aching pity for her strong man, something quite different from the easy gushes of condolence which had used to be all she could muster in the way of sympathy.

But Reuben did not take much notice of Rose, nor even of his little son. Now and then he would look at them together, sigh impatiently, then go out of the room.

Sometimes he would be more interested, and, in a fit of reaction from his proud loneliness, turn to her as of old for comfort. But those were the bitterest hours of all, for in them he would glimpse a difference, an aloofness. She had been much quieter since the birth of the second boy, she had not recovered her health so rapidly, and her eyes were big in the midst of bistred rings. She had given up flirting with Handshut, or with the young men from Rye, but she did not turn from them to her husband. Though he could see she was sorry for him, he felt—vaguely, uncertainly, yet tormentingly—that she was not all his, as she had been in brighter months. Sometimes he did not much care—sometimes a dreadful passion would consume him, and once he caught her to his breast and bruised her in his arms, crying—" I wöan't lose you—I wöan't lose you too."

Rose could not read his mood ; one day she would feel her husband had been alienated from her by his sorrow, another that his need of her was greater than ever. She herself carried a heavy heart, and in her mind a picture of the man who was " only looking in at the window." She seemed to see him standing there, with the moon

rising over his shoulder, while from behind him something in the garden, in the night, called . . . and called.

She could still hear that call, muted, tender, wild—the voice of her youth and of her love, calling to her out of the velvet night, bidding her leave the house where the hearth was piled with ashes, and feel the rain and the south wind on her lips. There was no escape in sleep, for her dreams showed her that window framing a sky soft and dark as a grape, with the blackness of her lover's bulk against it, while the moon rose over his shoulder, red, like a fiery pan. . . .

She felt afraid, and did not know where to turn. She avoided Handshut, who stood remote; and though her husband sometimes overwhelmed her with miserable hungry love, he often scarcely seemed to notice her or her children, and she knew that she counted far less than his farm. He was terribly harsh with her now, frowning by the hour over her account-books, forbidding this or that, and in his gloom scarcely noticing her submission.

July passed. Odiam was no longer cut off from the rest of the world by lime. Reuben with the courage of despair began to organise his shattered strength. He discharged Piper—now that his cows were gone he could easily do with a hand less. He sometimes wondered why he had not discharged Handshut, but the answer was always ready—Handshut was far the better workman, and Odiam now came easily before Rose. Not that Reuben's jealousies had left him—they still persisted, though in a different form. The difference lay in the fact that now he would not sacrifice to them the smallest scrap of Odiam's welfare.

He sometimes asked himself why he was still jealous. Rose no longer gave him provocation, she was much quieter than she had used to be, and seemed busy with her children and straitened house-keeping. It was once more a case of instinct, of a certain vague sensing of her

aloofness. Often he did not trouble about it, but sometimes it seared through him like a hot bar.

One evening he came home particularly depressed. He had just finished the most degrading transaction of his life—the raising of a mortgage on the Flightshot side of his land. It was horrible, but it was unavoidable. He could not now sell his milk-round, and yet he absolutely must have ready money if he was to stand up against circumstances. The mortgagee was a wealthy Rye butcher, and Reuben had hopes that the disgraceful affair might be kept secret, but also an uneasy suspicion that it was at that moment being discussed in every public-house.

He went straight to find Rose, for that mood was upon him. The due of loneliness which his shame demanded had been paid during the drive home from Rye, and now he quite simply and childishly wanted his wife. She was in the kitchen, stooping over some child's garment, the little frills of which she was pleating in her fingers. She lifted her head with a start as he came in, and he saw that her face was patched with tearstains.

"Wot've you bin crying for?" he asked as he slid a chair close to hers. He wondered if the humiliation of Odiam had at last come to mean to her a little of what it meant to him.

"I haven't been crying."

"But your face . . ."

"That's the heat."

He drew back from her a little. Why should she lie to him about her tears?

"Oh, well, if you döan't choose to tell me . . . But I've eyes in my head."

She seemed anxious to propitiate him.

"How did it go off? Have you settled with Apps?"

He nodded.

"It's all over now—I've touched bottom."

"Nonsense, Ben. You mustn't say that. After all

there's nothing extraordinary about a mortgage—uncle had one for years on a bit of his farm at Rowfant. Besides, think of all you've got left."

He laughed bitterly. "I äun't got much left."

Then suddenly he turned towards her as she sat there by him, her head bowed over her work—her delicate, rather impertinent nose outlined against the firelight, her cheek and neck bewitched with running shadows.

"But I've got you."

A great tenderness transported him, a great melting. He put his arm round her waist, and made as if to pull her close.

She drew back from him with a shudder.

It was only for a moment—the next she yielded. But he had seen her reluctance, felt the shiver of repulsion go through her limbs. He rose, and pushed back his chair.

"I'm sorry," he said in a low thick voice—"I'm sorry I interrupted your—crying."

Then he went out, and gave Handshut a week's notice.

§ 18.

Rose was intensely relieved. She felt that at last and for ever the tormenting mystery would have gone from her life. Once Handshut was away, she told herself, she would slip back into the old groove—a little soberer and softer perhaps, but definitely free of that Reality which had been so terribly different from its toy-counterfeit.

Once Handshut was gone, her heart would not pursue him. It was his continual presence that tormented. True, he never sought her out, or persecuted her, or even spoke to her without her speaking first—he only looked in at the window. . . . But a woman soon learns what it means to have a man's face between her and the simplicities of life in her garden, between her and the divinities of the stars and moon.

Rose did not find in her love a sweetness to justify the bitterness of its circumstances. The fact that it had been awakened by a man who was her inferior in the social-agricultural scale, who could give her nothing of the material prosperity she so greatly prized, instead of inspiring her with its beauty, merely convinced her of its folly. She saw herself a woman crazed, obsessed, bewitched, and she looked eagerly forward to the day when the spell should be removed and she should go back chastened to the common, comfortable things of life.

But meantime a strange restlessness consumed her, tinctured by a horrible boldness. There were moments when she no longer was afraid of Handshut, when she felt herself impelled to seek him out, and make the most of the short time they had together. There could be no danger, for he was going so soon . . . so few more words, so few more glances. . . . Thus her mind worked.

She was generally able to control these impulses, but as the days slipped by they grew too strong for her untrained resistance. She felt that she must make the most of her chances because they were so limited—before he went for ever she must have one more memory of his voice, his look—his touch . . . oh, no! her thoughts had carried her further than she had intended.

She found herself beginning to haunt the places where she would be likely to meet him—the edge of the horse-pond or the Glotten brook, the door of the huge, desolate cow-stable, where six cheap Suffolks emphasised the empty stalls. Reuben did not seem to take any notice of her, he had relieved his feelings by dismissing Handshut, and his farm had swallowed him up again. Rose felt defiant and forlorn. Both her husband and her lover seemed to avoid her. She would lean against the great wooden posts of the door, in the listless weary attitude of a woman's despair.

Then two days before the end he came. As she was

standing by the barn door he appeared at the horse-pond, and crossed over to her at once. He had seen that she was waiting for him—perhaps he had seen it on half a dozen other occasions when she had not seen him.

Rose could calm the silly jumps of her heart only by telling herself that this was quite an accidental meeting. She made an effort to be commonplace.

"How's Topsy's foal?"

"Doing valiant. Will you come out wud me tomorrow evenun to see the toll-burning?"

She flushed at his audacity.

"No!—how can I?"

"You can quite easy, surelye. Mäaster's going to Cranbrook Fair, and wöan't be home till laäte. It's the last night, remember."

She made a gallant effort to be the old Rose.

"What's that to me?—you've got some cheek!"

"I'm only not pretending as much as you are. Why shud you pretend? Pretending 'ull give you naun sweet to remember when I'm gone."

"What tolls are they going to burn?"

"The gëates up at Leasan and Mockbeggar, and then over the marsh to Thornsdale. It 'ud be a shame fur you to miss it, and mäaster can't täake you, since he's going to Cranbrook."

"It would never do if people saw us."

"Why? Since your husband can't go, wot's more likely than he shud send his man to täake you?"

Rose shuddered. "I'm not coming."

Handshut turned on his heel.

§ 19.

Already the turnpike gates had disappeared from the greater part of Sussex, but they still lingered in the Rye district, for various reasons, not always bearing close

inspection. There had been an anti-toll party both before and after the famous Scott's Float gate had catastrophically ended Reuben's political career—and at last this had carried the day. All the gates were to come down except those on the Military Road, and the neighbourhood was to celebrate their abolition by burning them in tar.

Reuben, still proud and sore, stood aloof from local jollities—besides, he had heard that there were to be some cheap milkers for sale at Cranbrook Fair, and he was anxious to add a little to his dairy stock. Though a large milk-round was out of the question, the compensation money he had received from Government would allow him to carry on a small dairy business, as in humbler days. Of course, the fact that he had lost over sixty cows from foot-and-mouth disease would materially damage his prospects even in a limited sphere, but a farm which let its dairy rot was doomed to failure, and Reuben was still untamed by experience, and hoped much from small beginnings.

So early that morning he drove off in his gig, accompanied by Pete, who had a good eye for cattle, and had moreover challenged the Canterbury Kid for a purse of five guineas. Rose watched them go, and waved goodbye unnoticed to her man, as he leaned forward over the reins, thinking only of how much he could spare for a yearling. She went back into the house, and stoned plums. After dinner she mended the children's clothes, with a little grimace for the faded ribbons and tattered frills which Reuben would not allow her to renew. Then she took the baby and little David for an airing in the orchard—Handshut, raking unromantically in the midden, saw her sitting, a splash of faded violet under an apple tree—then she bathed them and put them to bed.

All this was a propitiatory offering to the god of the hearth, who, however, did not take the slightest notice,

or stay as he so easily might (so the scripture saith) that hunger for her beloved which was gnawing at the young wife's heart. Instead, it seemed to grow in its devouring pain—her domesticity stimulated rather than deadened it, and by the time her day's tasks were over it had eaten up her poor heart like a dainty, and she was its unresisting prey.

After the children were in bed she changed her dress, putting on the best she had—a washing silk with pansies sewn over it, one of her wedding gowns. She frowned at it as she had frowned at the babies' dresses—it was so old-fashioned, and worn in places. She suddenly found herself wishing that she loved Reuben so much as not to mind wearing old clothes for his sake. For the first time she could visualise such a state of affairs, for she had met the man for whom she would have worn rags. If only that man had been Reuben, her lawful husband, instead of another! "But I'll be true to him! I'll be true to him!" she murmured, and found comfort in the words till she realised that it was the first time that she had ever glimpsed the possibility of not being true.

She went down into the kitchen, where Caro was baking suet.

"Caro, I'm going out to see the gates burned. I expect I'll be back before Ben is, but if I'm not, tell him where I'm gone."

"You can't go by yourself—he wudn't like it."

"I'm not going by myself—Handshut's taking me."

Caro's suety hands fell to her sides.

"Rose—you know—how can you?—that's worse than alone, surelye!"

"Nonsense! What's more natural that one of my servants should come with me, since my husband can't?"

"Your servant. . . ."

"Yes, my servant."

Caro, regardless of the suet on her hands, hid her face in them.

"Oh, Rose, I can't tell him—I daren't. Why, he turned away Handshut because of you."

"He did not, miss—you're impudent!"

"Well, why shud fäather git shut of the best drover he ever had on his farm, if it äun't——"

"Be quiet! I won't hear such stuff. I'm not going to be a prisoner, and miss my fun just because you and Ben are jealous fools."

"But I daren't tell him where you've agone."

"I dare say you won't have to—I'm not staying out all night."

She laughed one of her coarse screaming laughs, with the additional drawback of mirthlessness; then she went out of the room, leaving Caro sobbing into suety palms.

Outside in the yard, Handshut stood by the pump, apparently absorbed in studying the first lights of Triangulum as they kindled one by one in the darkening sky.

Rose pattered up to him in the shabby white kid shoes that had been so trim and smart five years ago.

"I've changed my mind."

"Then you äun't coming."

"Yes, I am."

"Then you haven't changed it."

§ 20.

The roads outside Rye were dark with people. A procession was forming up at Rye Foreign, and another at the foot of Cadborough Hill. Outside the railway station a massed band played something rather like the Marseillaise, while the grass-grown, brine-smelling streets were spotted with stragglers, hurrying up from

all quarters, some carrying torches that flung shifting gleams on windows and gable-ends.

Immense barrels of tar had been loaded on four waggons, to which four of the most prosperous farmers of the district had harnessed teams. Odiam was of course not represented, nor was Grandturzel, but three bell-ringing sorrels had come all the way from Kitchenhour, while the marsh farms of Leasan, the Loose, and Becket's House, accounted for the rest.

The crowd surged round the waggons, cheered, joked, sang. The whole of Rye was there—prosperous tradesmen from the High Street or Station Road, innkeepers, farmers, shop-assistants, chains of fishermen in high boots, jerseys, and gold ear-rings, coast-guards from the Camber, and one or two scared-looking women clinging to stalwart arms.

Rose shrank close to Handshut, though she did not take his arm. Sometimes the crowd would fling them together, so that they were close as in an embrace, at others they would stand almost apart, linked only by sidelong glances. The flare of a torch would suddenly slide over Handshut's face, showing her its dark gipsy profile, and she would turn away her eyes as from something too bright to bear.

Every now and then the crowd would start singing inanely:

> "Soles, plaice, and dabs,
> Rate, skate, and crabs.
> God save the Queen!"

It was like a muddled dream—people seemed to have no reason for what they did or shouted; they just ebbed and flowed, jostled and jambed, ran hither and thither, sang and laughed and swore. Rose looked round her to see if she could recognise anyone; now and then a face glowed on her in the torch-light, then died away, once she thought she saw the back of a tradesman's daughter whom she knew—but her chief feeling was of

an utter isolation with her loved one, as if he and she stood alone on some sea-pounded island against which the tides of the world roared in vain.

At last the crowd began to move. The band had crushed through to the front of it, and was braying Rule Britannia up Playden Hill ; then came the waggons, then the stout champions of freedom, singing at the pitch of their lungs :

" Soles, plaice, and dabs,
Rate, skate, and crabs.
God save the Queen ! "

The stars winked on the black zenith, while troubled winds sped and throbbed over the fields that huddled in mystery and silence on either side of the road—where noise and skirmish and darting lights, with the odours of warm human bodies, and the thudding and scrabbling of a thousand feet, proclaimed the People's holiday.

They flowed through Playden like a torrent through an open sluice, sweeping up and carrying on all sorts of flotsam—villagers from cottage doors, ploughboys from the farms down by the Military Canal, gipsies from Iden Wood . . . a mixed multitude, which the central mass absorbed, till all was one steaming and shouting blackness.

The first gate was at Mockbeggar, where the road to Iden joins that which crosses the Marsh by Corkwood and Baron's Grange. In a minute it was off its hinges, and swealing in tar, while lusty arms pulled twigs, branches, even whole bushes out of the hedges to build its pyre.

Rose shrank close to Handshut, so close that the clover scents of her laces were drowned in the smell of the cowhouse that came from his clothes. She found herself liking it, drinking in that soft, mixed, milky odour . . . till a cloud of stifling tar-smoke swept suddenly over them, and she reeled against him suffocating, while all round them people choked and gasped and sneezed.

The fire was lighted, a great crimson tongue screamed up in front of two motionless poplars, leaped as high as their tops, then spread fan-shaped, roaring. Men and women joined hands and danced round the blaze—in the distance, above the surging pack of heads, Rose could see them jumping and capering, with snatches of song that became screams every minute.

The fire roared like a storm, and the wood crackled with sudden yelping reports. The dancing girls' hats flew off, their hair streamed wide, their skirts belled and swirled . . . there was laughter and obscene remarks from the onlookers. Many from the rear pressed forward to join the dance, and those who were trampled on screamed or cursed, while one or two women fainted. Rose felt as if she would faint in the heat and reek of it all. She leaned heavily against Handshut and closed her eyes . . . then she realised that his arm was round her. He held her against him, supporting her, while either she heard or thought she heard him say—" Döan't be scared, liddle Rose—I'm wud you. I wöan't let you fall."

She opened her eyes. The people were moving. The Mockbeggar gate had been accounted for, and they rolled on towards Thornsdale. The jamb was not so alarming, for a good many revellers had been left behind, dancing round the remains of the bonfire, crowding into the public-house, or scattering in couples over the fields.

But though the jostling was no longer dangerous, Handshut still kept his arm about Rose, and held her close to his side. Now and then she made a feeble effort as if to free herself, but he held her fast, and she never put out her full strength. They walked as if in a dream, they two together, not speaking to anyone, not speaking to each other. Rose saw as if in a dream the Sign of Virgo hanging above Stone. The dipping of the lane showed the Kentish marshes down in the valley, with

the hills of Kent beyond them, twinkling with lights. The band lifted the strains of Hearts of Oak and Cheer, Boys, Cheer above the thud of marching feet, or occasionally drifted into sentiment with Love's Pilgrim—while every now and then, regardless of what was being played, two hundred throats would bray:

" Soles, plaice, and dabs,
Rate, skate, and crabs.
God save the Queen ! "

It was about nine o'clock when they came to Thornsdale, down on the Rother levels; the moon had risen and the marsh was smeethed in white. The air was thick with a strong-scented miasma, and beside the dykes long lines of willows faded into the mist. Here another orgy was started, in grotesque contrast with the pallid sleep of water. The gate that barred the Kent road was torn down, the bonfire prepared, the dance begun.

The mists became patched with leaping shadows, and a dull crimson wove itself into the prevailing whiteness. Flaming twigs and sparks hissed into the dykes, rolls of acrid tar-smoke spread like a pall over the river and the Highnock Sewer, under which their waters were spotted with fire. The ground was soon pulped and poached with the jigging feet, and mud and water spurted into the dancers' faces.

It was all rather ugly and ridiculous, and as before at Mockbeggar, the crowd began to straggle. This time there was no public-house to swallow up strays, but the marsh spread far and wide, a Land of Promise for lovers, who began to slink off two by two into the mists. Some who were not lovers formed themselves into noisy groups, and bumped about the lanes—waking the farmers' wives from Bosney to Marsh Quarter.

Rose felt Handshut's arm clinging more tenderly about her, and she knew that he wanted to lead her

away from the noise and glare, to the coolness and loneliness of the waterside. She wanted to go—her head ached, her nostrils tingled, and her eyes were sore with the fumes of tar, her ears wearied with the din.

"Let's go home," she said faintly—"it's getting late."

"We can go back by Corkwood across the marshes. It'll be quicker, and we shan't have no crowd spanneling round."

They elbowed their way into the open, and soon the noise had died into a subdued roar, not so loud as the sigh of the reeds, while the bonfire showed only as a crimson stain on the eastward piling fogs.

In time the contrast of silence grew quite painful. It ached. Only the sough of the wind in the reeds troubled it—the feet of Rose and Handshut were noiseless on the grass, they breathed inaudibly, only the breath of the watching night was heard.

They skirted the Corkwood dyke, from which rose the stupefying, sodden, almost flavorous, smell of dying reeds—a waterfowl suddenly croaked among them, and another answered her with a wail from beyond Ethnam. The willows were shimmering silver dreams, bathed in the light of the moon which hung above the Fivewatering and had washed nearly all the stars out of the sky—only Sirius hung like a dim lamp over Great Knell, while Lyra was faint above Reedbed in the north.

Rose walked half leaning against Handshut. She felt a very little feeble thing in the power of that great amorous night. The warm breath of the wind in her hair, the caress of moonlight on her eyes, the throbbing, miasmic, night-sweet scents of water and grass, the hush, the great sleep . . . all tore at her heart, all weakened her with their huge soft strength, all crushed with their languors the poor resistance of her will.

The tears began to roll down her cheeks, they shone on her face in the moonlight—they fell quite fast as she

walked on gripped against her lover's heart. She was leaning more and more heavily against him, for her strength was ebbing fast—oh, if he would only speak!—she could not walk much further, and yet she dared not rest beside him on that haunted ground.

At last they came to where the high land rose out of the levels like a shore out of the sea, with a lick of road on it, winding up to Peasmarsh. It was here that Rose's uncertain strength failed her, she lurched against Handshut, and still encircled by his arms slid to the grass.

They were in a huge meadow, sloping upwards to mysterious, night-wrapped hedges. The moonlight still trembled over the marsh, kindling sudden streaks of water, steeping fogs, silvering pollards and reeds. One could distinctly see the little houses on the Kent side of the Rother, Ethnam, and Lossenham, and Lambstand, some with lights blinking from them, others just black patches on the moon-grey country. Rose looked out towards them, and tried to picture in each a hearth beside which a husband and wife sat united . . . then suddenly they were blotted out, as Handshut's face loomed dark between her and them, and his lips slowly fastened on her own.

For a moment she yielded to the kiss, then suddenly tore herself away.

"Rose . . ."

"Let me go—I can't."

"Rose, why shud you pretend? You döan't love the mäaster, and you do love me. Why shudn't we be happy together?"

"We—I can't."

"Why?—I love you, and you love me. Come away wud me—you shan't have a hard life——"

"—It's not that."

"Wot is it then?"

"It's—oh, I can't—I'm his wife."

She pushed him from her as he tried to take her in his arms again, and stumbled to her feet.

"It's late—I—I must go home."

"Rose, you queer me."

He had risen too, and stood before her in mingled pain and surprise. He thought her resistance mere coyness, and suddenly flung his arms round her as she stood.

She began to cry.

"No, no—don't be so cruel! Let me go!—I'm his wife."

§ 21.

The walk home was dreary, for Rose and Handshut misunderstood each other, and yet loved each other too. She was silent, almost shamefaced, and he was a little disgusted with her—he felt that she had misled him, and in his soreness added "willingly."

They scarcely spoke, and the night spread round them its web of pondering silence. Aldebaran guttered above Kent, and the blurred patch of the Pleiades hung over the curded fogs that hid the Rother. There was no wind, but every now and then the grass rippled and the leaves fluttered, while a low hissing sound went through the trees. Sometimes from the distance came the shouts of some revellers still at large, echoing weirdly over the moon-steeped fields, and divinely purged by space and night.

Sobs were still thick in Rose's throat, when they came to Handshut's cottage, a little tumble-down place, shaped like a rabbit's head. She stopped.

"Don't come any further."

"Why?"

"It would be better if I wasn't seen with you."

He looked at her white face.

"You're frighted."

"No."

"Yes—and I'm coming wud you, surelye,"

"I should be frightened if you came."

She managed to persuade him to go his different way—though the actual moment of their parting was always a blur in her memory. Afterwards she could not remember if they had kissed, touched hands, or parted without a word. Her throat was still full of sobs when she came to Odiam; she was panting, too, for she had run all the way—she did not know why.

The house was swimming in the light of the western moon. Its strange curves and bulges, its kiln-shaped ends, and great waving sprawl of roof all shone in a white glassy brilliance, which was somehow akin to peace. There was a soft flutter of wind in the orchard and in the sentinel poplars, while now and then came that distant night-purged scrap of song:

> "Soles, plaice, and dabs,
> Rate, skate, and crabs.
> God save the Queen!"

Rose wondered uneasily what time it was. Surely it could not be very late, and yet the house was shut up and the windows dark.

She gently rattled the door-handle. There was no denying it—the house was locked up. It must be later than she thought—that walk on the Rother levels must have been longer than it had seemed to her thirsty love. A thrill of fear went through her. She hoped Reuben would not be angry. She was his dutiful wife.

She stood hesitating on the doorstep. Should she knock? Then a terrible thought struck her. Reuben must have meant to lock her out. Otherwise he would have sat up for her, however late she had been. She started trembling all over, and felt her skin grow damp.

She began to knock, first softly, then more desperately. She must get in. Nothing was to be heard except her own despairing din—the house seemed plunged in

sleep. Rose's fear grew, spread black bat's wings, and darkened all her thoughts—for she knew that someone must have heard her, she could not make all this racket quite unheard.

What could she do? Caro slept at the back of the house, and it struck her that she had better go round, and throw up some earth at her window. Perhaps Caro would let her in. She stepped back from the door, and was just turning the corner of the house when a window suddenly shot open above her, and Reuben's tousled head looked out.

"There's no use your trying to git in."

Rose gave a faint scream. In the moonlight her husband's face looked distorted, while his voice came thick and unnatural.

"Ben!"

"Go away. Go away to where you've come from. I shan't let you in."

"You can't keep me out here. It isn't my fault I'm late—and I'm not so very late, either."

"It's one o'clock o' the marnun."

She felt her heart grow sick. If she had been happy for four hours, why, in God's name, had they not passed like four hours instead of like four minutes?

"Ben, I swear I didn't know. I was up to no harm, I promise you. Please, please—oh please let me in!"

"Not I—at one o'clock o' the marnun—after you've bin all night wud a——"

"Ben, I swear I'm your true wife."

She fell against the wall, and her hair, disordered by embraces, suddenly streamed over her shoulders. The sight of it made Reuben wild.

"Git off—before I täake my gun and shoot you."

"Oh, Ben! . . ."

"Höald your false tongue. You're no wife o' mine from this day forrard. I wöan't be cuckolded in my own house."

His face was swollen, his eyes rolled—he looked almost as if he had been drinking.

"Ben, don't drive me away. I've been true to you, indeed I have, and Handshut's going to-morrow. Let me in—please let me in. I swear I've been true."

"I want none o' your lying swears—at one o'clock o' the marnun. Go back to the man you've come from—he'll believe you easier nor I."

"Ben, I'm your wife."

"I tell you, you're no wife of mine. I'm shut of you—you false, fair, lying, scarlet woman. You needn't cry and weep, nuther—none 'ull say as Ben Backfield wur a soft man fur woman's tears."

He shut the window with a slam. For some moments Rose stood leaning against the wall, her sobs shaking her. Then, still sobbing, she turned and walked away.

She walked slowly down the drive till she came to the little path that led across the fields to Handshut's cottage. A light gleamed from the window, and she crept towards it through tall moon-smudged grass—while from the distance came for the last time:

"Soles, plaice, and dabs,
Rate, skate, and crabs.
God save the Queen!"

§ 22.

A glassy yellow broke into the sky like a curse. It shone on Reuben's eyes, and he opened them. They were pink and puffed round the rims, and the whites were shot with little blood-vessels. His cheeks were yellow, and round his mouth was an odd greyish tinge. He had lain dressed on his bed, and was surprised to find that he had slept. But the sleep had brought no refreshment—there was a bad taste in his mouth, and his tongue felt rough and thick.

He sat up on the tumbled bed and looked round him.

Rose's nightgown was folded on her pillow, and over a chair lay a pair of the thin useless stockings he had often scolded her for wearing. A drawer was open, and from it came the soft perfume that adhered to everything she put on. He suddenly sprang out of bed and shut it with a kick.

"Durn her!" he said, and then two sobs tore their way painfully up his throat, shaking his whole body.

An hour later he went down. He had washed and tidied himself, none the less he disconcerted the household. Caro had lain awake all night, partly from misery, partly because of the baby, which she had been obliged to take charge of in the mother's absence. She had brought it down into the kitchen with her, and it had lain kicking in its cradle while she prepared the breakfast. She was worn out already after her sleepless night, and could not prevent the tears from trickling down her face as she cut bread for the meal.

"Stop that!" said Reuben roughly.

Except for this, he did not speak—nor after a few attempts on the former's part did Pete and Caro. They sat and gulped down their food in silence. Even Harry seemed to realise the general unrest. He would not sit at table, but wandered aimlessly up and down the room, murmuring, as was now his habit in times of domestic upheaval, "Another wedding—deary me! We're always having weddings in this house."

Then the baby began to howl because it was hungry. Rose had nursed it herself, and its wants had not occurred to the unhappy Caro or her father. There was delay and confusion while a bottle was fetched and milk prepared, and then—to crown all—cow's milk upset it, and it was sick. But Reuben escaped this final tragedy—he had left the room after a few mouthfuls, and gone to Handshut's cottage.

He could not restrain himself any longer. He must see Rose, and vent on her all the miserable rage with

which his heart was seething. He longed to strike her —he longed to beat her, for the wanton that she was. And he longed to clasp her in his arms and weep on her breast and caress her, for the woman that she was.

But the cottage was shut. With its red-rotting roof between two tall chimneys it looked exactly like a rabbit's head between its ears; the windows were blind, though it was past seven o'clock, and though Reuben knocked at the door loudly, there was no one to be seen. He prowled once or twice round the house, fumbling handles and window-latches, but there was no way of getting in. He listened, but he could not hear a sound. He pictured Rose and Handshut in each other's arms, laughing at him in his wretchedness and their bliss—and all the time he wanted the woman's blood more than the man's.

At last he wandered desperately away, treading the furrows of his new ground on Boarzell, reckless that he trod the young seed harrowed into them. In that black moment even his winter crops were nothing to him. He saw, thought of, realised only one thing—and that was Rose, the false, the gay, the wanton, and the beautiful—oh the beautiful!—laughing at him from another man's arms. He could see her laughing, see just how her lips parted, just how her teeth shone—those little teeth, so regular except for the pointed canines—just how the dimples came at the corners of her mouth, those dear little hollows which he had dug with his kisses. . . .

He ground his heel into the soft harrowed earth, and it cast up its smell into his nostrils unheeded. But the day of Boarzell was coming—its rival had been cleared out of the field, and the great hump with its knob of firs seemed to be lying in wait, till the man had pulled himself out of the pit of a false woman's love and given himself back to it, the strong, the faithful enemy.

About an hour later Reuben was down again at

Handshut's cottage, but this time a change had worked itself. The door hung wide open—and the place was empty. He went through the two miserable little rooms, but there was no one, and nowhere for anybody to hide. The remains of a meal of bread and tea were on the table, and a fire of sticks was dying on the hearth. The lovers had flown—to laugh at him from a safe distance.

All the rest of the day he prowled aimlessly about his land. His men were afraid, for it was the first time they had seen him spend a day without work. He touched neither spade nor pitchfork, he gave no orders, just wandered restlessly about the fields and barns. He ate no supper, but locked himself into his room, while the baby's thin wail rose through the beams of the kitchen ceiling, and little David cried fractiously for " mother."

The next day Caro, haggard after another night made sleepless by her charges, knocked at his door. He had not come down to breakfast, and at eight o'clock the postman had brought a letter.

" It's from Rose," said Caro timidly.

" To me ? "

" No, to me."

" Read it."

Caro read it. Rose was in London, but left that day for Liverpool. Handshut had saved a little money, and they were going to Canada. " I don't ask Ben to forgive me, for I know he never will."

" She's right there," said Reuben grimly.

Caro stood before him, creasing the letter nervously. Her father's wrath broke upon her, for want of his proper victim.

" Git out, can't yer—wot are you dawdling here for ? You women are all the same—you'd be as bad as her if you cud only git a man."

Caro shrank from the jibe as if from a blow, and Reuben laughed brutally. He had made one woman suffer anyway.

§ 23.

Of course the neighbourhood gloated ; and the rustic convention was set aside in Rose's favour, and all the shame of her elopement heaped on Reuben.

" No wäonder as she cudn't stick to him—hard, queer chap as he be."

" And thirty year older nor she, besides."

" Young Handshut wur a präaper lad, and valiant. I äun't surprised as she'd rather have un wudout a penny than old Ben wud all his gold."

" And he äun't got much o' that now, nuther. They say as he'll be bust by next fall."

Heads were shaken in triumphant commiseration, and the stones which according to all decent tradition should have been flung at Rose, hurtled round her husband instead.

Far away at Cheat Land, Alice Jury watched them fall—Alice Jury five years older than when she had struggled with Boarzell for Reuben before he married Rose. Her parents thought he had treated her badly, even though they did not know of the evening when she had humbled herself to plead for her happiness and his. She remembered that moment uneasily—it hurt her pride. But she could not regret having used her most desperate effort to win him, and she felt sure that he had understood her motive and realised that it was for him as well as for her that she had spoken.

Now, when she heard of his catastrophe, she wondered if he would come back. Did men come back ?—and if they did, was she the type of woman they came back to ? Perhaps she was too quick, too antagonistic. She told herself miserably that a softer woman could have saved Reuben, and yet, paradoxically, a softer woman would not have wished to do so.

She had seen very little of him or of Rose since their

marriage. Rose and she had never been friends, and Reuben she knew was shy of her. He had been angry with her too, because she had not carried her aching heart on her sleeve. Outwardly she had worn no badge of sorrow—she was just as quick, just as combative, just as vivaciously intellectual as she had always been. Though she knew that she had lost him through these very characteristics, with which she had also attracted him, she made no effort to force herself into a different mould. She refused to regret anything, to be ashamed of anything, to change anything. If he came back he should find the same woman as he had left.

She felt that he would come—he would return to her in the reaction that swung him from Rose. But would she be able to keep him? She did not feel so sure of that—for that did not depend on her or on him, but on that mysterious force outside themselves with which they had both already struggled in vain.

§ 24.

Reuben scarcely knew what brought him to Cheat Land. It was about a week after the blow fell that he found himself treading the once familiar lane, lifting the latch of the garden gate, and knocking at the green house-door. Nothing had changed, except to fade a little and show some signs of wear and tear. Alice herself had not changed, nor had she faded, though her cheeks might have fallen in a trifle and a few lines traced themselves round her mouth.

"Welcome," she said, and laughed.

He took her hand, and forgot to be angry because she had laughed.

"Come in, and we'll have a talk. Father's out, and mother's upstairs."

She led the way into the queer little kitchen, which was also unchanged except for the fading of the curtains,

and the introduction of one or two new books on the shelves. Alice pulled forward his old chair, and sat down opposite him on the settle. She wore one of her long wrapper-pinafores, this time of a warm clay-colour, which seemed to put a glow into her cheeks.

"Well, Alice," he said huskily.

"Well, Reuben, I'm glad to see you."

"You've heard?"

She nodded. Then she said gently:

"Poor Rose."

Reuben flushed.

"One o' my victims, eh?"

"Well, I knew you'd rather I said that than 'poor Reuben.'"

"Reckon I would. I remember as how you wur always trying to mäake out as my lazy good-fur-naun sons wur my victims, and as how I'd sacrificed them all to my farm; now I reckon you're trying to do the same wud Rose."

"Where is she?"

"I dunno. Somewheres between here and Canada. May she rot there lik a sheep on its back, and her man too. Now say 'poor Rose.'"

He turned on her almost fiercely, his lips curled back from his teeth in a sneer.

"If you speak like that I'll say 'poor Reuben.'"

"Well, say it—you wöan't be far wrong. Wot sort o' chap am I to have pride? My farm's ruined, my wife's run away, my children have left me—wot right have I to be proud?"

"Because, though all those things have happened, you're holding your head up still."

"But I äun't—yesterday I wur fair crying and sobbing in front of all the children. In the kitchen, it wur—after supper—I put down my head on the table, and——"

"Hush, I don't want to hear any more. I can guess what you must have suffered. I expect you miss Rose."

"I do—justabout."

"So should I in your place."

"She wur a beautiful woman, Alice."

Alice nodded.

"Oh, and her liddle dentical ways!"

Alice nodded again.

"You döan't mind me talking to you of her?"

"No, of course not."

"She wur the beautifullest I've known, and gay, and sweet, and a woman to love. But she deceived me. I married her expecting money, and there wur none—I married her fur her body, and she's given it to another."

"Well, you're not a hypocrite, anyway. You don't pretend you married her for any but the lowest motives."

"Wot should I have married her fur, then?"

"Some people marry for love."

"Love!—no. I've loved but one woman."

"Me!"

They had both said more than they intended, and suddenly realised it. Though the self-betrayal meant most to Alice, she was the first to recover a steady voice.

"But that does not matter now," she said calmly.

He leaned suddenly forward and took her hand.

"Alice."

Her hand lay in his, a very small thing, and her head bent towards it. She did not want him to see her cheeks flush and her eyes fill at this his first caress.

"Alice—how did you know?"

"I'm not a fool."

"I guessed too."

"Of course you did. I—I gave myself away. I pleaded with you."

He raised her hand slowly to his lips.

"I forgot you all the time I wur wud Rose," he remarked naively.

"You needn't tell me that."

"But now I—well, it's too late anyhow. I'm a married man, no matter that my wife's in Canada. Of course, I could git a divorce—but I wöan't."

"No—it would cost money."

"More than I could spare."

Alice laughed.

"I never looked upon Rose as my rival—I always knew my real rival was your farm, and though now Rose is out of the way, that still stands between us."

Reuben was silent. He sat leaning forward in his chair, holding Alice's hand. Then he abruptly rose to his feet.

"Well, I must be going. It's done me good, our talk. Not that you've said anything particular comforting, but then you never did. It's good anyway to sit wud a woman wot's not lik a fat stroked cat—not a thin kicked one, nuther," he added viciously, remembering Caro. "You're lik a liddle tit-bird, Alice. I love you. But I'm not sorry I didn't marry you, for you'd have busted me same as Rose, only in a different way."

"Most likely."

She laughed again. He stooped forward and kissed her forehead, and the laugh died on her lips.

§ 25.

The rest of that day Reuben was a little happier. He felt comforted and stimulated, life was not so leaden. In the evening he worked a little in the hop-gardens. They were almost cleared now, and the smoke of the drying furnaces was streaming through the cowls of the oasts, shedding into the dusk a drowsy, malt-sweetened perfume. When the moon hung like a yellow splinter above Iden Wood, the pickers went home, and Reuben

turned in to his supper, which for the first time since Rose's flight he ate with hearty pleasure.

He could not tell exactly what it was that had invigorated him, and jerked him out of his despair. It would seem as if Alice's presence alone had tonic qualities. Perhaps the secret lay in her unchangeableness. He had gone back to her after an absence of five years, and found her just the same, still loving him, still fighting him, the old Alice. Everything else had changed—his farm which in the former days had been the thriving envy of the countryside was now little better than a ruin, his home life had been turned inside out, but in the woman over at Cheat Land nothing had altered, love and strength and faithfulness still flourished in her. It was as if a man stumbling in darkness should suddenly hear a loved, familiar voice say "Here I am." The situation summed itself up in three words—She was there; and his heart added—"for me to take if I choose."

In spite of his revived spirits he could not sleep, but he went up early to his room, for he wanted to think. During the evening the idea had gained on him that he could still have Alice if he wanted her, and with the idea had grown the sensation that he wanted her with all his heart.

His return had been complete. All that she had ever had and lost of empire had re-established itself during that hour at Cheat Land. He wanted her as he had wanted her before he met Rose, but with a renewed intensity, for he was no longer mystified by his desire. He no longer asked himself how he could possibly love "a liddle stick of a woman like her," for he saw how utterly love-worthy she was and had always been. For the first time he saw as his, if only he would take it, a great woman's faithful love. This love of Alice Jury's had nothing akin to Naomi's poor little fluttering passion, or to Rose's fascination, half appetite, half

game. Someone loved him truly, strongly, purely, deeply, with a fire that could be extinguished only by death or—he realised in a dim way—her own will. The question was, should he pay the price this love demanded, take it to himself at the cost of the ambitions that had fed his life for forty years?

He sat down by the open window, leaning his elbow on the sill. The night was as soft as honey, and dark as a bowl of wine. The stars were scattered and dim, the moon had dipped into a belt of fogs, the fields were bloomed with darkness and sleep. The ridge of Boarzell was just visible under the Dog Star—the lump of firs stood motionless, for the wind had dropped, and not even a whisper from the orchard proclaimed its sleeping place.

Reuben's eyes swept the dim outlines of his farm—the yard, the barns, the oasts, the fields beyond, up to where his boundaries scarred the waste. It was all blurred and blanketed in the darkness, but his mind could see it in every detail. He saw the cow-stable empty except for the six cheap Suffolks which just supplied his household and one or two gentry with milk; he saw doors split and unhinged that he could not afford to mend, gaping roofs that he could not afford to retile, while the martins stole his thatch for their autumn broods; he saw his oat-harvest mostly straw, his hop-harvest gathered at a loss, his hay spoiled with sorrel; he saw himself short of labour, one man turned off, another run away; and he saw all the flints and shards and lime of Boarzell breaking his plough, choking his winter wheat, while on the lower ground runnels of clay made his corn sedgy, and everywhere the tough, wiry fibres of the gorse drank all the little there was of goodness out of the ground and scattered it from its blossoms in useless fragrance.

This was what his forty years of struggle had brought him to. He saw himself in the midst of a huge am-

bitious ruin. He had failed, his hopes were blighted—what could he expect to pull out of this wreck. It would be far better and wiser if he gave up the dreary uncertain battle, and took the sure rest at hand. If he sold some of the more fruitful part of his land he would be able to divorce Rose, then he could marry Alice and live with her a quiet, shorn, unambitious life. No one would buy the new ground on Boarzell, but he could easily sell the low fields by the Glotten brook; that would leave him with twenty or thirty acres of fairly good land round the farm, and all his useless encroachments on Boarzell which he would allow to relapse into their former state. He would have enough to live upon, to support his children and his delicate wife—he would be able to take no risks and make no ventures, but he would be comfortable.

His old father's words came back to him—" I've no ambitions, so I'm a happy man. I döan't want nothing I haven't got, so I haven't got nothing I döan't want." Perhaps his father had been right. After all, what had he, Reuben, got by being ambitious? Comfort, peace, home-life, wife, children, were all so many bitter words to him, and his great plans themselves had crumbled into failure—he had lost everything to gain nothing.

Far better give up the struggle while there was the chance of an honourable retreat. He realised that he was at the turning point—a step further along his old course and he would lose Alice, a step along the road she pointed, and he would lose Boarzell. After all he had not won Boarzell, most likely never would win it—if he persisted on his old ways they would probably only lead him to ruin, and later there might be no Alice to turn to. If he renounced her now, he would be definitely pledging himself to Boarzell and all his soaring, tottering schemes—he would not be able to " come back " a second time.

If he lost Alice now he might be losing her for a dream,

a bubble, a will-o'-the-wisp. Surely he would be wise to pull what he could out of the wreck, take her, and forget all else. Only a fool would turn away from her now, and press forward. In the old days it had been different, he had been successful then—now he was a failure, and saw his chance to fail honourably. Better take it before it was too late.

His mind painted him a picture it had never dared paint before—the comfortable red house basking in sunshine, with a garden full of flowers, a cow or two at pasture in the meadow, the little hop-field his only tilth —his dear frail wife sitting in the porch, his children playing at her feet or reading at her knee—perhaps they were hers too, perhaps they were not. He saw himself contented, growing stout, wanting nothing he hadn't got, so having nothing he didn't want . . . he was leaning over her chair, and gazing away into the southern distance where Boarzell lay against the sky, all patched with heather and thorns, all golden with gorse, unirrigated, uncultivated, without furrow or fence. . . .

. . . A shudder passed through Reuben, a long shudder of his flesh, for in at the open window had drifted the scent of the gorse on Boarzell. It came on no wind, the night was windless as before. It just seemed to creep to him over the fields, to hang on the air like a reproach. It was the scent of peaches and apricots, of sunshine caught and distilled. He leaned forward out of the window, and thought he could see the glimmer of the gorse-clumps under the stars.

The edge of Boarzell was outlined black against the faintly paler sky—he traced it from the woods in which it rose, up to its crest of firs, then down into the woods again. Once more it lay between him and the soft desires of his weakness; as long ago at Cheat Land, it called him back to his allegiance like a love forsaken. In the black quiet it lay hullish like some beast—but it was more than a beast to-night. It was like the gorse

on its heights, delicate perfume as well as murderous fibre, sweetness as well as ferocity. The scent, impregnating the motionless air, seemed to remind him that Boarzell was his love as well as his enemy—more, far more to him than Alice.

His ambition flared up like a damped furnace, and he suddenly saw himself a coward ever to have thought of rest. Boarzell was more to him than any woman in the world. For the sake of one weak woman he was not going to sacrifice all his hopes and dreams and enterprises, the great love of his life.

Boarzell, not Alice, should be his. He muttered the words aloud as he strained his eyes into the darkness, tracing the beloved outline. He despised himself for having wavered even in thought. Through blood and tears—others' and his own—he would wade to Boarzell, and conquer it at last. From that night all would be changed, the past should be thrust behind him, he would pull himself together, make himself a man. Alice must go where everything else had gone—mother, wife, children, friends, and love. Thank God! Boarzell was worth more to him than all these.

Leaning out of the window, he breathed in the scent of his slumbering land. His lips parted, his eyes brightened, the lines of care and age grew softer on his face. With his darling ambition, he seemed to recover his youth—once more he felt the blood glowing in his veins, while zeal and adventure throbbed together in his heart. He had conquered the softer mood, and banished the sweet unworthy dreams for ever. Alice—who had nearly vanquished him—should go the way of all enemies.

And the last enemy to be destroyed is Love.

BOOK VI

STRUGGLING UP

§ 1.

THAT night was a purging. From thenceforward Reuben was to press on straight to his goal, with no more slackenings or diversions.

He had learned one sound lesson, which was the superfluousness of women in the scheme of life. From henceforward he was "shut of" them. Long ago he had denied himself women in their more casual aspect, using them entirely for practical purposes, but now he realised that women no longer had any practical purpose as far as he was concerned. The usefulness of woman was grossly overrated. It is true that she produced offspring, but he thought irritably that Providence might have found some more satisfactory way of perpetuating the human race. Everything a woman did was bound to go wrong somehow. She was nothing but a parasite and an incubus, a blood-sucking triviality, an expense and a snare. So he tore woman out of his life as he tore up the gorse on Boarzell.

It was wonderful how soon he adapted himself to his new conditions. At first he missed Rose, but by the time he had got rid of her clothes and swept the perfume of her out of his room, he had ceased to hunger. He never heard of her again—he never knew what life she led in the new land, whether the reality of love brought her as much happiness as the game, or whether her old

taste for luxury and pleasure reasserted itself and ruined both love and lover.

As for Alice, he found to his surprise that she was not so dangerous even as Rose, for an ideal is never so enslaving as a habit. He avoided Cheat Land, and there was nothing to bring her across his path as long as he did not seek her. So the yoke of woman dropped from Reuben's neck, leaving him a free man.

He formed a plan of campaign. The large unreclaimed tracts of Boarzell must be left for a time, while he devoted his attention to the land already cultivated. He must economise in labour, so he hired no one in Handshut's place, but divided his work among the other men. His rekindled zeal was hot enough to ignite even the dry sticks of their enterprise, and Odiam toiled as it had never toiled before. Even Harry was pressed for service, and helped feed the pigs and calves, besides proving himself a most efficient scarecrow.

Early the next spring Reuben had a stroke of luck, for he was able to sell the remainder of his lease of the Landgate shop to a greengrocer. With the proceeds he bought half a dozen more cows, and grounded his dairy business more firmly. In spite of his increased herd he still had several acres of superfluous pasture, and pocketing his pride, advertised "keep" for stock, which resulted in his pocketing also some much-needed cash. His most immediate ambition was to pay off the mortgage he had raised a year ago, and restore to Odiam its honourable freedom.

It seemed almost as if his luck had turned, for the harvests that year were exceedingly good. In most of his fields there were two hay-crops, while the oats and wheat yielded generously, even on Boarzell. As for the hops, he reaped a double triumph, for not only did his hop-gardens bring in more than the average to the acre, but almost everyone else in the neighbourhood did badly, so prices rose in a gratifying way.

Under this encouragement, part of the old adventurous spirit revived, and Reuben bought a Highly Commended bull at Lewes Fair, and advertised him for service. In spite of catastrophe, he still believed cattle-rearing to be the most profitable part of a farmer's business, and resolved to build up his own concern on its old lines. With regard to the dairy, Caro was an excellent dairy woman, besides looking after the two little children, and Odiam had a fair custom for its dairy produce, also for fruit and vegetables.

Thus, in a very small way, and with continual hard work and anxiety, the farm was beginning to revive. Reuben felt that he was recapturing his prestige in the neighbourhood, and, when his labours allowed him, assisted the good work by drinking slow glasses of sherry in the bar of the Cocks, and making patronising remarks about his neighbours' concerns.

He was glad from the bottom of his heart that he had not been wooed from his ambition, in a moment of weakness, by softer dreams which he now looked upon as so much dust.

§ 2.

In the course of the following year Reuben had news of all his absent sons, except Benjamin, who was never heard of again.

One day Caro came home from Rye, where she had gone with the vegetables to market, and said that she had met Bessie Lamb. Bessie was on her way to the station, where she would take the train for Southampton. Robert had written that he was now able to have her with him in Australia, and she had at once packed up her few belongings and set out to join him in the unknown.

Bessie was now thirty, and looked older, for she had lost a front tooth and her pretty hair had faded: but she was as confident of Robert's love as ever. He had

written to her by every mail, she told Caro, and they had both saved and scraped and waited and counted the days till they could consummate the love born in those fields eternally fixed in twilight by their memory. There had been no intercourse between Odiam and Eggs Hole, so, as Robert had never written to his family, Caro heard for the first time of the sheep-farm in Queensland and its success. He had done badly at first, Bessie said, what with the drought and many other things against him, but now he was well established, and she would be far better off and more comfortable as the felon's wife than she had ever been as the daughter of honest parents.

She left Caro with a restless aching in her heart. In spite of the lost front tooth and the faded hair, she had impressed her in much the same way as Rose on her wedding night. Here was another woman sure of love looking confidently into a happy future, wooed and sought after, a man's bride. . . . Jolting home in the empty vegetable cart beside Peter, one or two tears found their way down Caro's cheek. Oh, if only some man, no matter whom, tyrant, criminal, no matter what, would love her, give her for one moment those divine sensations which she had seen other women enjoy! Why must she alone, of all the women she knew, be loveless?

It was her father's fault, he had kept her to work for him, he had starved her purposely of men's society—and now her youth was departing, she was twenty-nine, and she had never heard a man speak words of love, or felt his arms about her, or the sweetness of his lips on hers.

When they came to Odiam, she told Reuben what she had heard about Robert.

"Would you believe it, he has a hundred sheep—and a man working under him—and money coming in quite easy now. It wur hard at first, Bessie says, and

he wur in tedious heart over it all, but he pulled through his bad times, and now he's doing valiant."

"And who has he got to thank fur it, I'd lik to know? Who taught him how to run a farm, and work, and never spare himself and pull things through? There he wur, wud no sperrit in him, grudging every ströake he did fur Odiam. If I hadn't kept him to it, where 'ud he be now?"

News of Richard came a few months later. He was heard of as a barrister on the Southern Circuit, and defended a gipsy on trial for turnip-stealing at Lewes. Rumours of him began to spread in the neighbourhood—he was doing well, Anne Bardon was working for him, and he was likely to be a credit to her. At the Cocks he was the subject of much respectful comment, and for the first time Reuben found himself bathed in glory reflected from one of his children. He could not help feeling proud of him, but wished he did not owe anything to the Bardons.

"Tedious argumentatious liddle varmint he wur—I'm not surprised as he's turned a lawyer. And he had good training fur it, too. There's naun to sharpen the wits lik a farmer's life, and I kept him at it, tough and rough, though he'd have got away if he cud. Many's the time I've wopped him near a jelly fur being a lazybones, and particular, which you can't be and a lawyer too. But I reckon he thinks it's all that Bardon woman's doing."

A few weeks later Richard wrote himself, breaking the silence of years. Success had made him feel more kindly towards his father. He forgave the frustrations and humiliations of his youth, and enquired after his brothers and sisters and the progress of the old farm. Anne Bardon had kept him fairly well posted in Backfield history, but though he knew of Reuben's unlucky marriage and of the foot-and-mouth catastrophe, he had evidently lost count of absconding sons, for he

seemed to think Pete had run away too, which Reuben considered an unjustifiable aspersion on his domestic order. However, the general tone of his letter was conciliatory, and his remarks on the cattle-plague "most präaper."

As for himself, his life had been full of hard work and the happiness of endeavour crowned at last by success. Anne Bardon he referred to as an angel, which made Reuben chuckle grimly. He had already had a brief, though he was called to the bar only two years ago—which struck his father as very slow business.

He also gave news of Albert, but not good news. He had kept more or less in touch with his brother, and had done what he could to help him, yet Albert had made a mess of his literary life, partly through incapacity, partly through dissipation. He had wasted his money and neglected his chances, and his friends could do little for him. Richard had come more than once to the rescue, but it was impossible to give real help to one of his weak nature—also Richard was still poor, and anxious to pay off his debts to Anne Bardon.

"I reckon," said Reuben, "as how they'd all have been better off if they'd stayed at home."

§ 3.

Soon afterwards a letter came from Albert, asking for money, but again Reuben forbade any notice to be taken of it. For one thing he could not afford to help anyone, for another he would not even in years of plenty have helped a renegade like Albert. His blood still boiled when he remembered the boy's share in his political humiliation. He had shamed his father and his father's farm. Let him rot!

So Albert's letter remained unanswered—Caro felt that Reuben was unjust. She had grown very critical of him lately, and a smarting dislike coloured her judg-

ments. After all, it was he who had driven everybody to whatever it was that had disgraced him. He was to blame for Robert's theft, for Albert's treachery, for Richard's base dependence on the Bardons, for George's death, for Benjamin's disappearance, for Tilly's marriage, for Rose's elopement—it was a heavy load, but Caro put the whole of it on Reuben's shoulders, and added, moreover, the tragedy of her own warped life. He was a tyrant, who sucked his children's blood, and cursed them when they succeeded in breaking free.

Caro had been much unhappier since Rose's flight. She had loved her in an erratic envious way, and Rose's gaiety and flutters of generosity had done much to brighten her humdrum life. Now she was left to her brooding. She felt lonely and friendless. Once or twice she went over to Grandturzel, but the visits were always difficult to manage, and somehow the sight of her sister's happiness made her sore without enlivening her.

It was only lately that her longing for love and freedom had become a torment. Up till a year or two ago her desires had been merely wistful. Now a restless hunger gnawed at her heart, setting her continually searching after change and brightness. She had come to hate her household duties and the care of the little boys. She wanted to dance—dance—dance—to dance at fairs and balls, to wear pretty clothes, and be admired and courted. Why should she not have these things? She was not so ugly as many girls who had them. It was cruel that she should never have been allowed to know a man, never allowed to enjoy herself or have her fling. Even the sons of the neighbouring farmers had been kept away from her—by her father, greedy for her work. Tilly, by a lucky chance, had found a man, but lucky chances never came to Caro. She saw herself living out her life as a household drudge, dying an old maid, all coarsened by uncongenial work, all starved of love, all sick of, yet still hungry for, life.

Sometimes she would be overwhelmed by self-pity, and would weep bitterly over whatever task she was doing at the time, so that her tears were quite a usual sauce to pies and puddings if only Reuben had known it.

The year passed, and the new year came, showing the farm still on the upward struggle, with everyone hard at work, and no one, except Reuben, enjoying it particularly. Luck again favoured Odiam—the lambing of that spring was the best for years, and as the days grew longer the furrows bloomed with tender green sproutings, and hopes of another good harvest ran high.

Caro watched the year bud and flower—May came and creamed the hedges with blossom and rusted the grass with the first heats. Then June whitened the fields with big moon-daisies and frothed the banks with chervil and fennel. The evenings were tender, languorous, steeped in the scent of hay. They hurt Caro with their sweetness, so that she scarcely dared lift her eyes to the purpling twilight sky, or breathe the wind that swept up heavy with hay and roses from the fields. July did nothing to heal her—its yellow, heat-throbbing dawns smote her with despair—its noons were a long-drawn ache, and when in the evening hay and dust and drooping chervil troubled the air with shreds and ghosts of scent, something almost akin to madness would twist her heart.

She felt as one whose memory calls and yet has nothing to remember, whose thoughts run to and fro and yet has nothing to think of, whose hopes pile themselves, and yet is hopeless, whose love cries out from the depths, and yet is loveless.

One evening at the beginning of August she wandered out of the kitchen for a breath of fresh air in the garden before going up to bed. Her head ached, and her cheeks burned from the fire. She did not know it, but the flush and fever made her nearly beautiful. She was

not a bad-looking woman, though a trifle too dark and heavy-featured, and now the glow on her cheeks and the restless brilliancy of her eyes had kindled her almost into loveliness.

She picked one or two roses that drooped untended against the fence, she held them to her breast, and the tears came into her eyes. It was nearly dark, and the lustreless cobalt sky held only one star—Aldebaran, red above Boarzell's firs. A puff of wind came from the west, and with it a snatch of song. Someone was singing on the Moor, and the far-away voice wove itself into the web of trouble and yearning that dimmed her heart.

She moved down to the gate and leaned over it, while her eyes roved the twilight unseeing. The voice on the Moor swelled clearer. It was a man's voice, low-pitched and musical:

> " Farewell, farewell, you jolly young girls !
> We're off to Rio Bay ! "

She remembered that there had been a wedding at Gablehook. One of the farmer's girls had married a Rye fisherman, and this was probably a guest on his way home, a little the worse for drink.

> " At Vera Cruz the days are fine—
> Farewell to Jane and Caroline ! "

The song with its hearty callousness broke strangely into the dusk and Caro's palpitating dreams. Something about it enticed and troubled her; the singer was coming nearer.

> " At Nombre de Dios the skies are blue—
> Farewell to Moll, farewell to Sue ! "

She stood at the gate and could see him as a blot on the Moor. He was coming towards Odiam, and she

watched him as he plunged through the heather, singing at the pitch of his lungs :

" At Santiago love is kind,
And we'll forget those left behind—
So kiss us long, and kiss us well,
Polly and Meg and Kate and Nell—
Farewell, farewell, you jolly young girls !
We're off to Rio Bay."

He had struck the path that ran by the bottom of the garden, and swaggered along it with the seaman's peculiar rolling gait, accentuated by strong liquor. Caro felt him coming nearer, and told herself uneasily that she had better go back into the house. He was drunk, and he might speak to her. Still she did not move, she found herself clinging to the gate, leaning her breast against it, while her tongue felt thick and dry in her mouth.

He was quite close—she could hear the thud of his step on the soft earth. Her hands grasped the two gate-posts, and she leaned forward over the gate, so that her face caught the faint radiance that still lingered in the zenith. He had stopped singing, but she could see him now distinctly—a tall, loosely-built figure, with dark face, and woolly hair like a nigger's, while his seaman's earrings caught the starlight.

He drew level with her, not seeing her. She did not move, she scarcely breathed, and he had almost passed her . . . then suddenly his eyes turned and met hers.

" Hello, Susan ! "

He stood swaying before her on his heels, his hands in his trouser-pockets, his head a little on one side. Caro did not speak—she could not.

" What time is it, dear ? "

" I—I dunno," she faltered, her voice sounding squeaky and unlike her own : " it might be nine."

" It might be Wales or Madagasky,
It might be Rio de Janeiro."

he trolled, and Caro was suddenly afraid lest someone should hear in the house. She glanced back uneasily over her shoulder.

" Papa on the look-out ? "

She coloured, and began to stutter something.

" I've been to a wedding," he said conversationally ; " a proper wedding with girls and kisses."

He suddenly leaned over the gate and kissed Caro on the lips.

She gave a little scream and started back from him. For a moment earth, sky, and trees seemed to reel together in one crazy dance. She was conscious of nothing but the kiss, her first kiss ; it had smelt and tasted strongly of brandy, if the truth were told, but it had none the less been a kiss, and her sacrament of initiation. She stood there in the darkness with parted lips and shining eyes. The dusk was kind to her, and she pleased the sailor.

" Come out for a walk," he said, and lifted the latch.

Caro trembled so that she could hardly move, and once again came the feeling that she ought to turn and run back into the house. But she was powerless in the clutch of her long-thwarted emotions. The tipsy sailor became God to her, and she followed him out on to the Moor.

After all he was not really drunk, only a little fuddled. He walked straight, and his roll was natural to him, while though he was exceedingly cheerful, and often burst into song, his words were not jumbled, and he generally seemed to have a fair idea of what he was saying.

She wondered if she were awake—everything seemed so strange, so new, and yet paradoxically so natural. Was she the same Caro who had washed the babies and cooked the supper and resigned herself to dying an old maid ? She could not ponder things, ask herself how it was that a man who had not known her ten

minutes could love her—all she realised was his arm round her waist, and in her heart a seethe of happy madness.

" When the stars are up above the Main
And winking in the sea,
'Tis then I dream of thee,
Emilee !
And my dreams are full of pain "

—sang the sailor sentimentally. His arm crept up from her waist to her shoulder and lay heavy there. They strolled on along the narrow path, and the darkness stole down on them from the Moor, wrapping them softly together. They told each other their names—his was Joe Dansay, and he was a sailorman of Rye, who had been on many voyages to South America and the Coral Seas. He looked about twenty-five, though he was tanned and weather-beaten all over. His eyes were dark and foreign-looking, so was his hair. His mouth was a trifle too wide, his nose short and stubborn.

He was now leaning heavily on Caro as he walked, and too shy, and perhaps reluctant, to ask him to lift his arm, she naively suggested that they should sit down and rest. Dansay was delighted—she was not the timid little bird he had thought, and directly they had sunk into the heather he seized her in his arms, and began kissing her violently on neck and lips.

Caro was frightened, horrified—she broke free, and scrambled to her feet. She nearly wept, and it was clear even to his muddled brain that her invitation had been merely the result of innocence more profound than that which had stimulated her shyness. Rough seaman though he was, he was touched, and managed to soothe her, for she was too bashful and frightened to be really indignant. They walked a few yards further along the path, then at her request turned back towards Odiam.

They parted uneasily, without any arrangement to meet again.

§ 4.

For the first few hours of her sleepless night, Caro's happiness outweighed her regret. Her mind sucked her little experience like a sugar-plum and filled her thoughts with sweetness. She lived over the adventure from its birth in a song on Boarzell to its consummation in the blessedness of a kiss. Afterwards it became a little smudged, a little terrifying, and the end had not been in keeping with the beginning. None the less, the fact remained that she had been kissed, that she had tasted at last of the glories of love, felt the touch of a man's lips, of his arm about her . . . she was no longer without knowledge; when other women spoke of these things, an answering thrill would creep into her heart, and words of experience to her tongue.

Then she asked herself—would he come again? Her joy seemed almost too divine to be renewed, she could hardly picture such a profanity as its repetition. Yet as the night wore on, the question began to loom larger than all her blessed certainties—and with it came a growing tendency to dwell on the latter part of her experience, on the awkward aloofness of the walk home, and the uneasy parting at the gate. It struck her that she had been a fool to take fright at his violence. After all, if he loved her so much . . . it was wonderful how quickly he had fallen in love, and quick things are more apt to be violent than slow ones. Besides, men were inclined to be rough and fierce by nature. Thus she reassured and reproached herself. Perhaps she had driven him away, perhaps her timidity had made him doubt her love. Perhaps she had been too squeamish. After all . . . .

She rose the next morning with a bad headache and her eyes staring rather plaintively out of black saucers. None the less she was happy, even in spite of her

regrets. She loved and had been loved, so she told herself over and over again as she dressed David and Bill and prepared the breakfast. Why, even if, when he got home, Joe Dansay discovered that he did not really love her, she would still have had his love, and as for herself, she would go on loving him for ever—" for ever and ever and ever," she repeated in a low, trembling voice as she cut her father's bacon.

During the rest of the day it was the same—she moved in a kind of exalted dream. The most common objects thrilled her, and gave her unexpected tokens of divinity. Her work was consuming, her leisure beatific. The children loved her, for that day she could do what she had never done properly to their mind, and that is—play ; while with Harry, dribbling and muttering, she was tender, as no one but Naomi had been.

Towards evening uneasiness sprang up again, with the old question—would he return ? She told herself that if he did, she would not hold back, she would not let her inexperience and timidity rob her or him of their love. She would let him kiss her as he pleased—love was too good a thing to risk for a few qualms. But would he come ?—would he give her the chance of reparation ? The sun dipped behind Castweasel, the hot sky cooled into a limpid green—stars specked it in the north, and the moon came up behind Iden Woods, huge and dim.

Caro ran out once or twice into the garden ; the flowers hung pale and stirless on their stems, and from the orchard, full of the babble of a hidden wind, came a faint scent of plums. The old walls of Odiam seemed to smell of the sunshine they had caught and held during the day. The gable-ends broke into the stars, and the windows gleamed in the yellowing light of the moon. Up towards the south the mass of Boarzell rose hullish and deserted—far away at Ellenwhorne a dog was barking, but all else was still

§ 5.

There was no doubt that Joe Dansay had got drunk at Willie Tailleur's wedding. The fact was cruelly emphasised by the headache with which he woke up the next morning. He thought it very hard luck, for after all, he had not got nearly so drunk as he might have, as he often had. However, he had been forced into abstinence by a long voyage from Sierra Leone, and put down his sufferings to nature's mutiny at such an unwholesome state of affairs.

At present he lodged with some relations in Watchbell Street, and round him were all the Dansays and Tailleurs and Espinettes and Perrots, the Rye fisher tribe, of French origin—which was still traceable in their names, in their brown eyes, and the sensitiveness of their mouths. He nearly always went to his people between voyages, for the Rye girls took his fancy. There was at this moment a charmer in Wish Ward on whom a good part of his pay had already been spent. Sometimes he went out in his uncle Bob Dansay's fishing boat, for he was not above handling a net between his ventures on the high seas.

He mumbled curses as he dressed, and bathed his head in cold water. He did not deserve this visitation—usually he regarded an after-debauch headache as one of the marvellous acts of Providence, in which he, like most sailormen, believed with a faith which though conveniently removed from works was deeply tinged with admiration. But yesterday he had not been really drunk—why, he could remember nearly everything that had happened, the dancing, the songs, the girls, how he had walked home singing " Rio Bay," and how he had met that queer girl at the farmhouse gate, and thought he was going to have some fun with her and been disappointed.

Though he had spent, on and off, some years in Rye, he had seen very little of the surrounding country, and did not know that Odiam was the farm of his adventure. Caro had told him her name, and he had heard of Ben Backfield, but did not remember much about him. The episode did not affect him very deeply. At dinner he asked his aunt the name of Backfield's farm, and forgot it as he walked down Wish Ward that evening, wearing his best guernsey and breeches, his hands in his pockets, his pipe in his mouth, his earrings glittering in the forest of his hair.

His headache had passed off, and he felt a man again ; so he sought the woman. She lived in a small old house wedged tight between two new ones ; her window was dark, and her threshold silent, though he knocked again and again. He walked up and down once or twice in front of the cottage whistling " Ropes and Rum "—perhaps she had gone to do some shopping ; he saw himself sitting down to a feast of pickled herrings in her kitchen.

Then when he was about a hundred feet from the house the door opened stealthily and a man slunk out. The gleam of a street lamp passed over his face, and Dansay rushed at him with his fists up.

The story of Joe Dansay has nothing to do with us except so far as it affects Caro Backfield, so there will be no digression to explain why he and Albert Cock fought each other up and down Wish Ward till the police came running up and hauled them off to gaol. The next morning he came before the magistrate, and was fined ten shillings and costs or fourteen days. He was able to find the money, but it was not the fine which made him drag his footsteps and hang his head as he walked home, it was the sight of his victim of the night before leaving the court arm-in-arm with a certain pretty witness.

Evening came, the dusk fell, stars floated up out of

the mists that piled themselves along the shore, the bleat of sheep came from the marsh, and the eye of Dungeness Lighthouse flashed off the Point into the fogs. Inland the country was wrapt in a tender haze, perfumed with hops and harvest. The moon rose above the Fivewatering, and bronzed the dark masses of wood huddling northward. The scented wind seemed to sigh to him of a woman's hair and lips, of the softness of a woman's hand in his, of her silly little voice talking love and nonsense. But the house in Wish Ward was shut to him—perfidious woman had added yet another perfidy to her score. For about the twentieth time his love dream had been shattered. Now she was eating pickled herrings with another man.

A kind of defiance, a kind of swagger possessed him. He would show her and himself how little he cared. He would find another woman this very night. He remembered the dark-browed, demure little thing of the farmhouse gate. He would go back to her, and she would not be so timid this time—they never were.

§ 6.

"Oh, I thought you wur never coming back."

She murmured it over and over again as he kissed her, and she clung to him like a child. There was something about her words and about herself as she quivered in his arms that touched him inexpressibly. He swore that he loved her, and forgot all about the woman in Wish Ward.

That evening Caro remembered her own counsels and did not draw back from his love. She let him kiss her as much as he chose, though he saw with amusement that he frightened her sometimes. They wandered on Boarzell through webs of star-fretted mist, they drank the night together, and sacramental silences. It was only when she realised that her father would be shutting

up the house that Caro was able to tear herself away, and this time they parted with many kisses and vows to meet again.

He came nearly every night. If she was not at the gate he would whistle a few bars of " Rio Bay," and she would steal out as soon as she could do so without rousing suspicion. Boarzell became theirs, their accomplice in some subtle, beautiful way. There was a little hollow on the western slope where they would crouch together and sniff the apricot scent of the gorse, which was ever afterwards to be the remembrancer of their love, and watch the farmhouse lights at Castweasel gleam and gutter beside Ramstile woods.

Sometimes he would talk to her of the strange voyages he had made—how he had lived on ships ever since he was a boy of twelve, and had seen nearly the whole world, from the fiery steaming forests of Equador to the Northern Lights that make a mock day in Spitzbergen. He told her strange tales of wooded atolls in the South Seas, painting a fairyland she had scarcely dreamed, of palms motionless in the aromatic air, of pink and white shores, and lagoons full of fish all winged and frilled and iridescent—of the sudden swift sunrises and sunsets between Cancer and Capricorn, of the great ice-wall in the south, below Tasmania, which he had longed to penetrate, for who knew what lay beyond it in the Unknown ? " And there's another like it what I've seen from Franz Josef Land—maybe there's countries beyond it, with gold." Then he told her of the terrible storms south of the Horn, of the uncharted Nelson Strait—of northern Baffin Land, where he had once gone on a whaler, of Rio Grande and the buried city of Tenoctitlan—" where there's gold." Gold seemed to be hidden in large quantities all over the world according to Dansay, and Caro once asked him why he had never brought any back. " Because I love what's better than

gold," he answered, and drew her, happy and quivering, into his arms.

She became inexpressibly dear to him during those meetings. Her timidity and innocence charmed him so completely that he preserved them longer than he had at first felt inclined to do. His vanity was tickled to think that though she was past thirty he was the first man who had kissed her. She was not bad-looking, either, with her straight black brows and huge eyes—in spite of toil she did not look her years, and during the weeks of his courtship she seemed to grow younger and prettier, she grew daintier. Yet she largely retained the qualities that had first attracted him, her admiration for him was unbounded and guilelessly expressed—she would listen in tender reverence to his yarns, and received his caresses with a humble gratitude that went straight to his heart.

As for Caro, life was a rainbow dream. The hardships of the day were gladly lived through in expectation of the joys of the evening. She felt very few qualms of conscience, even when the barrier was past which she had thought impassable. Somehow love seemed to alter her whole point of view, or rather stripped her of one altogether—after all, her point of view had never been more than the acceptance of other people's. Besides, there were things in love that she had never guessed; nobody had ever done anything to make her realise that there was beauty in it—Rose's flirtations, her father's jealous passion had never suggested such a thing. But now her life was brimmed with beauty, unimaginable beauty that welled up into the commonest things and suffused them with light. Also, about it all was that surprising sense of naturalness, which almost always comes to women when they love for the first time, the feeling of " For this I was born."

Sometimes she would have anxious moments, a strange sense of fear. " I'm a bad woman," she would

repeat to herself, and she would dread the thought of her sister Tilly. But the terrors did not last, they were driven away by the remembrance of what her life had been before she met Joe—its drabness, its aimless toil, its lassitude, its humiliations. She would have been a fool to spurn her golden chance when it came. It had been her only chance ; after all it was not as if she ever could have married. She had had to choose between the life she had led up to that August evening and the life she was leading now, and she could not regret her choice.

She never asked Dansay to marry her. He had given her pretty clearly to understand that he was not a marrying man, and she was terrified of doing or saying anything that might turn him against her. One of the things about her that charmed him most was the absence of all demand upon him. She never asked for presents, and the few things he bought her stimulated both her humble gratitude and her alarm lest he should have spent too much money. One day he suggested that he should take her to Boarzell Fair.

" Oh, Joe, would you really ! "

" Of course, if you can manage it without us being spotted."

" I reckon I cud, for fäather äun't going this year, he's got an auction at Appledore."

" Then you come along ; I'll take you, and we'll have some fun."

" But I döan't want you to waste your money."

" It won't be wasting it. Why, Lord love ye, I'd rather spend it on you than anything in the world."

Her look of surprise and adoration was his reward.

§ 7.

Boarzell Fair was in many ways a mark of the passage of the years and a commentary on history. Not only did the atmosphere and persons of it change very much

as the nineteenth century changed, but the side-shows were so many lights cast on popular opinion, politics, and progress.

For instance, in the year 1878, the Panorama which had started with the Battle of Trafalgar and the Royal Gardens of Vauxhall, now gave thrilling if belated episodes of the Siege of Paris, and a gorgeous picture of the Queen being declared Empress of India at Delhi. The merry-go round not only went by steam, but was accompanied by a steam organ playing "The Swell Commercial" and "Married to a Mermaid" unfalteringly from noon till night. In the shooting gallery men potted Mr. Gladstone, Mr. Dillon, and Charles Peace, instead of the Russian Czar or Nana Sahib of their youth, or the hated Boney of their fathers. It all moved with the times, and yet remained four or five years behind them. One came in contact with movements which had just ebbed from the country, waves that had rolled back everywhere except in these lonely rural districts where interests and hatreds came later and lingered longer than in more accessible parts.

The population had altered too. Old Gideon Teazel had died some years ago, and his son Jasper was boss in his place. He was unlike his father both in character and physique, an undersized little ruffian, seasoned by a long career in horse-stealing, who beat his wife openly on the caravan steps, and boasted that he had landed more flats at thimble-rig than any thimble-engro in England. He would have cheated the shirt off any man at the Show, and established a sort of ascendancy through sheer dread of his cunning. The only man who did not fear him was Mexico Bill, a half-breed in charge of the cocoanut shie. Mexico Bill feared only the man who could knock him out, and that man had not yet been found in Boarzell Fair. As a matter of fact he was usually pretty genial and docile, but he had been wounded in the head by Indians long ago, and some-

times went mad and ran amok. On these occasions the only thing to do was to trip him up, and enrol as many volunteers as possible to sit on him till he came to his senses.

There was no longer any fiddler at the Fair. Harry Backfield's successor had been a hurdy-gurdy which played dance music louder and more untiringly than any human arm could do. Dancing was still a vital part of the festivities, but it was more decorous than in the days when Reuben and Naomi had danced together to the tune of " Seth's House," or Robert and Bessie to " My Decided Decision." Only in the evening it became rowdy, when the sun had set and the mists had walled in the Show with nacreous battlements.

Joe and Caro joined the dancers on their arrival. It was the first time in her life that Caro had danced at the Fair, and the experience thrilled her as wonderfully as if it had not been just a link in the chain of a hundred new experiences. The hurdy-gurdy was playing " See me Dance the Polka," and off they skipped, to steps of their own, betraying in Dansay's case a hornpipe origin.

She saw people that she knew, but had no fear of betrayal, unless from Pete, who was, however, safe in the fighting-booth, now conveniently banished by public opinion to the outskirts of the Fair. Pete would " tell on " her, she knew, but no one else cared enough for Reuben to betray his daughter to him. She looked with kindly eyes on all the world as her accomplice—that all the world loves a lover is primarily the lover's point of view.

Besides, she was lost in the crowd which jigged and clumped around her, not even daunted by the unfamiliar waltz that the hurdy-gurdy struck up next. Nobody, except fanatics, bothered about steps, so one could dance to any tune.

In time Caro grew tired, and they wandered off to the shooting-gallery and the merry-go-round. They

patronised the cocoanut shie, and won a gilt saucer at the hoop-là stall. In the gipsy's tent Caro was told that she would ride in a carriage with a lord, and have six fine children, all boys, while Dansay was promised such wealth that he would be able to throw gold to crossing-sweepers. They sat in the Panorama till it stuck fast at a gorgeous tableau of Britannia ruling the waves from what looked like a bath chair. Joe bought Caro a pie at the refreshment stall, and himself ate many beef rolls. She was overwhelmed by the lavish way he spent his money, and quite relieved for his sake when they went back to the dancing green.

The day had slipped by, and twilight was settling down on the Fair. The stalls flared up, a red glow streamed into the sky, and patched the shagginess of Boarzell's firs with crimson shreds. The dancing had become more disorderly, the decent folk had retired, and left the madder element to its revels. The mass of the dancers was blurred, confused in the grey smeeth. It seemed to invite Joe and Caro, for now in the thick of it one could give and take surreptitious kisses ; some of the kisses were not even surreptitious—the love-making was becoming nearly as open as in the days when Reuben and Naomi had danced together. Caro was no longer shocked at the " goings-on," which had used to scandalise her in earlier years when she knew them scarcely more than by hearsay. Her very innocence had made her easier to corrupt, and she now joined in the revel with a delight scarcely less abandoned, if more naïve, than that of the cottage wantons who bumped round her. It was all so new, and yet so natural, this kicking and capering to a jigging tune. Who would have imagined that the lonely bitter Caro, enviously watching the fun in earlier years, should now have both a partner and a lover ? She laughed like a child at the thought.

Then suddenly her laughter died ; her expression became fixed, and she swayed a little in Joe's arms, as

she stared into the crowd of spectators. They were on the outskirts of the dancers, and quite close to them stood Pete. He had come out of the fighting-booth, still in his bruiser's dressing-gown, evidently to watch the fun. He was looking straight at Caro as she danced dishevelled, and both he and Dansay knew that he had recognised her. They saw his lips tighten, and an angry look came on his face which his profession had not made more benevolent than Nature intended.

"Quick," muttered Joe, and he guided her cleverly enough through the pack of dancers, leading her out on the opposite side.

"Oh, Joe, he's seen us."

Dansay bit his lip—he was afraid so.

Caro began to cry.

"My fäather will kill me, surelye."

She knew for certain that Pete would tell him, and then almost quite as certainly she would lose the adventure which had become life itself to her. She would be driven back into the old prison, the old loneliness, the old despair. She clung to Dansay, weeping and frantic:

"Oh, Joe—döan't let them find me. I can't lose you—I wöan't lose you—I love you so."

He was leading her away from the people, to the back of the stalls. He was nearly as miserable and aghast as she. For he had become extraordinarily fond of her during those few weeks, and the thought of losing her turned him cold. He had been a fool to bring her to the Fair.

"You must come away with me," he said abruptly.

"Oh, Joe!"

It was a bold step, but he saw that none other would serve, and he realised that she was not the kind of woman to take advantage of him and make herself a permanent encumbrance.

"Yes—there's nothing for it but that. We'll go

down and stay at the Camber. You'll be safe with me, and I've got a little money put by."

Considering how much she had already given him, it was perhaps strange that she shuddered a little at this open venture.

"You'll be good to me, Joe!"

"Won't I, just!"

Something in the wistfulness and humility of her appeal had touched him to the heart; he clasped her to him with a passion for once free from roughness, and for one moment at least had every intention of sticking to her for ever.

§ 8.

It was not from Pete that Reuben first heard of his daughter's goings-on. Caro's benevolent trust in humanity had been misplaced, and at the Seven Bells where he called for a refresher on arriving at Rye station, various stragglers from Boarzell eagerly betrayed her, "just to see how he wud täake it."

Reuben received the news with the indifference due to outsiders. But he was not so calm when Pete told his tale at Odiam.

"The bitch," he growled, "I'll learn her. Dancing wud a sailor, you say she wur, Pete?"

"Yes," said Pete, "and wud her hair all tumbling."

"I'll learn her," repeated Reuben. But he never had the chance. By the time the two males had sat up till about three or four the next morning, they came to the conclusion that Caro must have seen Pete watching her and run away.

"She'll never come back," said Pete that evening—"you täake my word fur it."

"That's another of my daughters gone fur a whore."

"Who wur the fust?"

"Why Tilly—goes off wud that lousy pig-keeper up at Grandturzel. She's no better than Caro."

"And there wur Rose," added Pete, anxious to supply instances.

Reuben swore at him.

He felt Caro's disappearance more acutely than he would allow to show. First, she had left him badly in the lurch in household matters—he had to engage a woman to take her place, and pay her wages. Also she had caused a scandal in the neighbourhood, which meant more derisive fingers pointed at Odiam. Pete was now the only one left of his original family—his children and their runnings-away had become a byword in Peasmarsh.

In the course of time he heard that Caro was living with Joe Dansay down at the Camber, but he made no effort to bring her back. "I'm shut of her," he told everyone angrily. If Caro preferred a common sailor and loose living to the dignity and usefulness of her position at Odiam, he was not going to interfere. Besides, she had disgraced his farm, and he would never forgive that.

It struck him that his relations with women had been singularly unfortunate. Caro, Tilly, Rose, Alice, had all been failures—indeed he had come to look back on Naomi as his only success. Women were all the same, without ambition, without self-respect, ready to lick the boots of the first person who stroked them and was silly enough not to see through their wiles.

During those days he spent most of his time digging on Boarzell. It relieved him to thrust viciously into the red dripping clay, turn in on his spade, and fling it back over his shoulder. It was strange that so few men realised that work was better than women—stranger still that they did not realise how much better than a woman's beauty was the beauty of the earth. Toiling there on the Moor, Reuben's heart gave itself more utterly to its allegiance. The curves of Boarzell against the sky, its tuft of firs, its hummocked slopes, its wet life-smelling

earth, even its savagery of heather, gorse, and thorn brought healing to his heart, and strength. Caro and other women could do what they chose, love, hate, follow, cheat, and betray whom they chose, as long as they left him the red earth and the labour of his hands.

§ 9.

Early the next year Reuben heard that Caro and her lover had left Camber, and gone no one knew where, but by that time the elapse of months had dulled his feelings on the matter, and Caro, never very important in herself, was buried under the concerns of his farm.

Odiam, after superhuman efforts, was looking up again. Years of steady work and strenuous economy had restored it to something like its former greatness. Reuben was no longer hampered by an extravagant wife, and he also had the advantage of a clear field. For at last Grandturzel had given up the battle. Realf and Tilly were now the parents of four healthy, growing, hungry children, and had come to the conclusion that domestic happiness was better than agricultural triumph. They were contented with their position on a farm of considerable importance and fair prosperity. They took no risks, but lived happily with each other and their children, satisfied that they could comfortably rear and educate their little family, and leave it an inheritance which, if not dazzling, was not to be despised.

This was an infinite relief to Reuben. He was now no longer under the continual necessity of going one better than somebody else—he could rebuild along his own lines, and economise in the way he chose. However, this very convenient behaviour of Grandturzel did nothing to soften his resentment. Tilly and Realf were, and were always to be, unforgiven. Sometimes he could see that they seemed inclined to be friendly —Realf would touch his hat to him if they met, and

perhaps Tilly would smile—but Reuben was not to be won by such treacly tactics. It was largely owing to the rivalry of Grandturzel that ruin had nearly swallowed him up four years ago—and he would never be weak enough to forget it.

Meantime it was soothing to contemplate the result of his efforts. After all, his own striving had done more for him than any slackness or grass-fed contentment on the part of Grandturzel. His greatest achievement was the paying off of his mortgage, which he managed in the spring of '79. Now he could once more begin saving money to buy another piece of Boarzell. There was something both novel and exhilarating about this return to old ways. It was over ten years since he had bought any land, but now were renewed all the ticklish delights of calculation, all the plannings and layings-out, all the contrivances and scrapings and wrestlings.

There were still about two hundred acres to acquire, including the Grandturzel inclosure, on which, however, he looked more hopefully than of old. He had so far subdued not more than about a hundred and forty acres—most of the northern slope of Boarzell adjoining Odiam and Totease, and also a small tract on the Flightshot side. This was not very encouraging, for it represented the labours of two-thirds of a lifetime, and at the same time left him with more than half his task still unaccomplished. If it had not been for his setback ten years ago he would now probably have over two hundred and fifty acres to his credit. But he told himself that he would progress more quickly now. Also, though he had not enlarged his boundaries during the last ten years, he had considerably improved the quality of the land within them. The first acquired parts of Boarzell were nearly as fruitful and richly cultivated as the original lands of the farm, and even the '68 ground was showing signs of coming into subjection.

Besides, Reuben had now a respectable herd of cattle —not quite so numerous or valuable as the earlier lot which had been sacrificed, but none the less respectable, and bringing him in good returns. He had made some sound profit out of his service-bull, and his sheep were paying better than they had paid for years. He no longer "kept" other people's cattle. Odiam, whether in stock or cash, was now inviolate.

Soon the rumour spread round Peasmarsh that Backfield was going to buy some more land. Reuben himself had started it.

"He's done better nor he desarved," said Coalbran of Doozes.

"He's warked fur it all the same, surelye," said Cooper of Kitchenhour.

"He's worked like the Old Un fur the last five year," said Dunn, the new man at Socknersh.

"Well, let's hope as he's found it worth while now as he's lost two wives and eight children," was the sage comment of old Vennal of Burntbarns.

Then the conversation wandered from Reuben's successes to the price he had paid for them, which proved more interesting and more comforting to those assembled.

At Flightshot the Squire viewed Odiam's recovery with some uneasiness. It would be a good thing for him if he could sell more land to old Backfield, but at the same time his conscience was restless about it. Backfield was a rapacious old hound, who forced the last ounce of work out of his labourers, and the last ounce of money out of his tenants. He was a hard master and a hard landlord, and ought not to be encouraged. All the same, Bardon did not see how he was to avoid encouraging him. If Backfield applied for the land it would be suicidal folly to refuse to sell it. He was in desperate straits for money. He had appealed to Anne, who had money of her own, but Anne's reply had been frigid. She wrote:—

"I do not see my way to helping Flightshot while I have so many other calls upon me. Richard is still unsettled, and unable entirely to support himself. I should be a poor friend indeed if after having induced my protégé to abandon his home and rely on me, I should forsake him before he was properly established. Be a man, Ralph, and refuse to sell any more land to that greedy, selfish, unscrupulous old Backfield."

But Ralph only sighed—it was all very well for Anne to talk!

§ 10.

Except for a steady maintenance of prosperity by dint of hard work, the year was uneventful. Autumn passed, and nothing broke the strenuous monotony of the days, not even news of the absent children. Then came an evening in winter when Reuben, Pete, and Harry were sitting in front of the kitchen fire. Reuben and his son were half asleep, Harry was mumbling to himself and playing with a piece of string.

A great quiet was wrapped round the house, and a great darkness, pricked by winking stars. The barns were shut, the steamings of the midden were nipped by brooding frosts—now and then the dull movements of some stalled animal could be heard, but only from the yard; in the house there was silence except for the singing fire, and Harry's low muttering which seldom rose into words. Then suddenly there was a knock at the door.

Reuben started, and Pete awoke noisily. Harry was frightened and dropped his string, crying because he could not find it. The knock came again, and this time Pete crossed the room yawning, and opened the door.

For a moment he stood in front of it, while the icy wind swept into the room. Then he dashed back to Reuben's chair.

"Fäather—it's Albert!"

Reuben sprang to his feet. He was still only half awake, and he rubbed his eyes as he stared at the figure framed in the doorway. Then suddenly he pulled himself together.

"Come in, and shut the door behind you."

The figure did not move. Reuben took a step towards it, and then it tottered forward, and to his horror fell against him, almost bearing him to the floor.

Pete, who had recovered his faculties to some extent, helped support his brother. But he had fainted clean away, and the only thing to do was to let him down as gently as possible.

"Lordy!" said Pete, and stooped over Albert, his hands on his knees.

"You're sure that's Albert?" asked Reuben, though he really did not doubt it for a moment.

"Course I am. That's his face sure enough, though he's as thin as wire."

"It's nigh fifteen year since he went away. Wot did he want to come back fur?"

"I reckon he's half starved—and he looks ill too."

"Well, he's swooneded away, anyhow. Can't you do something to mäake him sensible?"

"Poor feller," said Pete, and scratched his head.

Reuben was irritated by this display of sentiment.

"You needn't go pitying him, nuther—he's a lousy Radical traitor. You do something to mäake him sensible and out he goes."

At this juncture Albert opened his eyes.

"Hullo," he said feebly.

"Hullo," said Pete. Something in his brother's pitiable condition seemed to have touched him.

Albert sat up—then asked for some water.

Pete fetched a jug, which he held awkwardly to Albert's lips. Then he helped him to a chair, and began to unlace his boots.

"Stop that," shouted Reuben—"he äun't to stay here."

"You'll let me stop the night," pleaded Albert. "I'll explain things when I'm better. I can't now."

"You can go to the Cocks—I wöan't have you in my house."

"But I haven't got a penny—cleaned myself out for my railway ticket. I've walked all the way from the station, and my lungs are bad."

"Wot did you come here fur?"

"It struck me that you might have some natural affection."

"Me!—fur a hemmed Radical! You'd better have saved your money, young feller—I'm shut of you."

"If you're still harping on my politics," said Albert fretfully, "you needn't worry. Either side can go to the devil, for all I care. I suppose it's natural to brood over things down here, but in London one forgets a rumpus fifteen years old."

"I'll never disremember the way you shamed me in '65."

"I don't ask you to disremember anything. Only let me have supper and a bed, and to-morrow——"

A fit of coughing interrupted him. He strained and shook from head to foot. He had no handkerchief, and spat blood on the floor.

"Fäather!" cried Pete, "you can't turn him out lik this."

"He's shamming," said Reuben.

"Quite so," said Albert, who seemed to have learned sarcasm in exile—"hæmorrhage is so deuced easy to sham."

"He's come back to git money out of me," said Reuben, "but he shan't have a penny—I've none to spare."

"I don't ask for that to-night—all I ask is food and shelter, same as you'd give to a dog."

"Well, I'll leave you to Pete," said Reuben, and walked out of the room. He considered this the more dignified course, and went upstairs to bed.

The brothers were left alone, except for Harry, who was busy imitating Albert's cough, much to his own satisfaction.

Pete fetched some soup from the larder and heated it up to a tepid condition; he also produced bread and cold bacon, which the prodigal could not touch. Albert sat hunched up by the fire, coughing and shivering. He had not altered much since he left Odiam; he was thin and hectic, and had an unshaved look about him, also there were a few grey streaks in his hair—otherwise he was the same. His manner was the same too, though his voice had changed completely, and he had lost his Sussex accent.

Pete ministered to him with a strange devotion, which he carried finally to the pitch of putting him into his own bed. The absence of so many of the children did not make much more room in the house, as Reuben's ideas on sleeping had always been compact—also there were the little boys, the new dairy woman, and a big store of potatoes. Pete's large untidy bed was the only available accommodation, and Albert was glad of it, for he had reached the last stage of exhaustion.

"I bet you anything," he said before he fell asleep, "that now I'm here the old boy won't be able to turn me out, however much he wants to."

§ 11.

Whether Reuben would have succeeded or not is uncertain, for he was never put to the proof. The next day Albert was feverish and delirious, and the doctor had to be sent for. He cheerfully gave the eldest Backfield three months to live—his lungs were in a dreadful state, one completely gone, the other partly so. He

had caught a chill, too, walking in the dark and cold. There could be no thought of moving him.

So Albert stayed in Pete's room, almost entirely ignored by his father. After some consideration, Reuben had come to the conclusion that this was the most dignified attitude to adopt. Now and then, when he was better, he sent him up some accounts to do, as it hurt him to think of his son lying idle week after week; but he never went near him, and Albert would never have willingly crossed his path. Those were not the days of open windows and fresh-air cures, so there was no especial reason why he should ever leave the low-raftered stuffy room, where he would lie by the hour in a frowsty dream of sickness, broken only by fits of coughing and hæmorrhage.

His return had created a mild stir in the neighbourhood, and in Reuben's breast, despite circumstances and appearances, many thrills of gratification. Albert's penniless and broken condition was but another instance of the folly of those who deserted Odiam. None of the renegades, Reuben told himself, had prospered. Here was Albert come home to die; Robert, after a prelude in gaol, had exiled himself to Australia, where the droughts lasted twenty years; Richard, in spite of studyings and strivings and spendings, had only an occasional brief, and was unable to support himself at thirty-five; Tilly was living on a second-rate farm instead of a first-rate one; Caro was living in sin; Benjamin was probably not living at all. There was no denying it—they had all done badly away from Odiam.

However, he refused all temptations to discuss this latest prodigal. If anyone asked him how his son was doing, he would answer, "I dunno; ask Pete—he's the nurse."

Pete's attitude was Reuben's chief perplexity. It is true that in early years Albert seemed to have exercised a kind of fascination over his younger brothers and

sisters ; still that was long ago, and Pete did not appear to have given him a thought in the interval. But now he suddenly developed an almost maternal devotion for the sick and broken Albert. He would sit up whole nights with him in spite of the toils of the day, he trod lumberingly about on tiptoe in his presence, he read to him by the sweat of his brow. Something in his brother's weakness and misery seemed to have appealed to his clumsy strength. The root of sentimentality which is always more or less encouraged by a brutal career was quickened in his heart, and sprouted to an extent that would have mystified the many he had bashed. It perplexed and irritated his father. To see Pete hulking about on tiptoe, carrying jugs of water and cups of milk, shutting doors with grotesque precaution, and perpetually telling someone upstairs in a voice hoarse with sympathy that he " wurn't to vrother, as he'd be better soon "—was a foolish and maddening spectacle. Also Reuben dreaded that Pete would scamp his farm work, so he fussed round after everything he did, and called him from Albert's bedside times without number to hoe turnips or guide the plough.

However, someone had to look after the invalid, and Pete might as well do it as anybody else—as long as he realised that his sick-nursing was a recreation, and not a substitute for his duties on the farm.

Spring came on, and Albert grew worse. Pete began to look haggard ; even his bullish strength was faltering under sleepless nights, days of moil and sweat, and constant attendance on the sick man. The dairy-women helped a little, but what they did they did unwillingly ; and as the dairy was short-handed, Reuben did not like them to take up any extra work. Pete's existence was a continual round of anxiety and contrivance, and he was not used to either.

There was also another depressing factor. As he felt his end approaching Albert began to develop a conscience

and remorse. He said he had wasted his life, and as time wore on and he became weaker he passed from the general to the particular. The memory of certain sins tormented him, and he used Pete as his confessor.

Pete was a very innocent soul. He had spoilt many a man's beauty for him, but he had never been the slave of a woman's. He had broken arms and ribs, and noses by the score—and he had once nearly killed a man, and only just escaped being arrested for manslaughter ; but he had remained through it all an innocent soul. He had always lived in the open air, always worked hard, always fought hard—his recreations had been whistling and sleep. He had never thought about sin or evil of any kind, he had never troubled about sex except as it manifested itself in the brutes he had the care of, he had never read or talked bawdry. All the energies of his nature had been poured into hard work and hard blows.

Therefore the confessions of a man like Albert came upon him as a revelation. Indeed, at first he scarcely understood them. They disquieted him and sometimes made him nervous and miserable, not because he had any very definite moral recoil, but because they forced him to think. Few can gauge the tragedy of thinking when it visits an unthinking soul. For the first time in his life Pete found himself confused, questioning, lying awake of nights and asking "why?" The world suddenly showed itself to him as a place which he could not understand. It frightened him to think about it. Sometimes he was acutely miserable, but he would not betray his misery to Albert, as the poor fellow seemed to find relief in his confidences. And on and on the stream flowed, swifter and muddier every day.

§ 12.

At last matters reached a climax. It was late in March ; Albert was much worse, and even the doctor looked solemn. "He won't last till the summer," he

said in answer to one of Pete's questions, and unluckily the sick man heard him.

When Pete went back into the room he found him struggling under the bedclothes, the sweat trickling down his face.

"Pete!" he cried chokingly—"I won't die!—I won't die!"

"And you wöan't, nuther," said Pete, soothing him.

"But I heard what the doctor said to you."

Pete was at a loss. He could lie if the lie were not too constructive, but in a case like this he was done for.

"Well, döan't you fret, nohow," he murmured tenderly.

But it was no good telling Albert not to fret. He threw himself from side to side in the bed, moaned, and almost raved. For months now he had known that he must die soon, but somehow the idea had not really come home to him till this moment. He would not let Pete leave him, though there was a load of mangolds to be brought in; he clung to his brother's hand like a child, and babbled of strange sins.

"I've been so wicked—I daren't die. I've been the lowest scum. I'm lost. Pete, I'm damned—I shall go to hell."

Albert had been known openly to scoff at hell, whereas Pete had never thought much about it. Now it confronted them both under a new aspect—the scoffer trembled and the thoughtless was preoccupied.

"Döan't fret," reiterated poor Pete, desperate under the fresh complication of theology, "I reckon you're not bad enough to go to hell, surelye."

"But I'm the worst—the worst that ever was. I'm scum, I'm dirt"—and out poured more of the turbid stream, till Pete sickened.

"If I could only see a parson," sobbed Albert at last.

"A parson?"

"Yes—maybe he could comfort me. Oh, I know

I've mocked 'em and scoffed 'em all my life, but I reckon they could do summat for me now."

In his weakness he had gone back not only to the religious terrors of his youth, but to the Sussex dialect he had long forgotten.

Pete scarcely knew what to do. He had become used to his brother's gradual disintegration, but this utter collapse was terrifying. He offered his own ministrations.

"You've told me a dunnamany things, and you can tell me as many more as you justabout like"—touching the climax of self-sacrifice.

But Albert's weak mind clung to its first idea with scared tenacity. He was still raving about it when Pete came in from his work that evening.

"I want a parson," he moaned, throwing himself about the bed, and his terrors seemed to grow upon him as the darkness grew.

Neither of them slept that night. Albert was half delirious, and obsessed by the thought of hell. The room looked out on Boarzell, and he became convinced that the swart, tufted mass outlined against the sprinkled stars was hell, the country of the lost. He pictured himself wandering over and over it in torment. He said he saw fire on it, scaring the superstitious Pete out of his life.

"On the great Moor of the lost
Wander all the proud and dead—
Those who brothers' blood have shed,
Those who brothers' love have crossed."

He broke into his own verse, pouring it out deliriously:

"There's the shuddering ghost of me
Lips all black with fire and brine,
Chained between the libertine
And the fasting Pharisee."

Then he became obsessed by the idea that he was out on the Moor, wandering on it, and bound to it. The

earth was red-hot under his feet, and he picked them up off the bed like a cat on hot bricks, till Pete began to laugh inanely. He saw round him all the places he had known as a child, and called out for them, because he longed to escape to them from the burning Moor—"Castweasel! Castweasel! . . . Ramstile! . . . Ellenwhorne . . ."

It was strange to hear a man calling out the names of places in his fever as other men might call the names of people.

It was all a return to Albert's childhood. In spite of fifteen years in London, of a man's work and a man's love and a man's faith, he had gone back completely to the work and love and faith of his childhood. Odiam had swallowed him up, it had swallowed him up completely, his very hell was bounded by it. He spoke with a Sussex accent; he forgot the names of the women he had loved, and cried instead the names of places, and he forgot that he did not believe in hell, but thought of it as Boarzell Moor punctured by queer singing flames.

Pete lay and listened shuddering, waiting with sick desire for the kindling of the dawn and the whiteness that moved among the trees. At last they came, the sky bloomed, and the orchard flickered against it, stirred by a soundless wind. The poor fellow sat up in bed, all troubled and muddled by things that had never touched him before. He stretched himself and yawned from force of habit, for he was not in the least sleepy, then he began to dress.

"What is it?" mumbled Albert, himself again for a moment.

"I'm going to fetch a parson," said Pete.

It was very gallant of him to do so, for it meant venturing still further into new spheres of thought. None of the Backfields had been to church for years, though Reuben prided himself on being a good churchman, and Pete was rather at a loss what to do in a

ghostly crisis such as this. However, on one thing he was resolved—that he would not go through another night like the last, and he credited a parson with mysterious cabalistic powers which would miraculously soothe the invalid and assure him of sleep in future.

So he tramped off towards the Rectory, wondering a little what he should say when he got there, but leaving it to the inspiration of the moment. He warmed his honest heart with thoughts of Albert sleeping peacefully and dying beautifully, though it chilled him a little to think of death. Why could not Albert live ?—Pete would have liked to think of him lying for years and years in that big untidy bed, pathetic and feeble, and always claiming by his weakness the whole strength that a day of unresting toil had left his brother.

The morning flushed. A soft pink crept into ponds and dawn-swung windows. The light perfumes of April softened the cold, clear air—the scent of sprouting leaves in the woods, and of primroses in the grass, while the anemones frothed scentless against the hedges. Pete was about half a mile from the village when he heard the sound of angry voices round a bend in the lane, pricked by little screams from a woman. Expecting a fight he hurried up eagerly, and was just in time to see one of the grandest upper cuts in his life. A short, well-built man in black had just knocked down a huge, hulking tramp who had evidently been improving the hour with a woman now blotted against the hedge. He lay flat in the road, unconscious, while his adversary stood over him, his fist still clenched and all the skin off his knuckles.

" Lordy ! but that wur justabout präaper ! " cried Pete, bustling up, and sorry that the tramp showed no signs of getting on to his feet.

" It's settled him anyhow," said the man in black.

They both stooped and eyed him critically.

" You've landed him in a good pläace." said Pete ; " a little farther back and he'd have been gone."

" Praise be to God that his life was spared."

Pete looked in some surprise at the bruiser, who continued:

" I'm out of practice, or I shouldn't have skinned myself like this—ah, here's Coalbran's trap. Perhaps he'll give you a lift, ma'am, into Peasmarsh."

The woman was helped into the trap, and after some discussion it was decided not to give themselves the trouble of taking the tramp to the police station, but to pull him to the side of the road and leave him to the consequences he had brought upon himself.

" He's had some punishment," said Pete when they were alone. He inspected the tramp, now feebly moaning, with the air of a connoisseur. " I'm hemmed if I ever saw a purtier knock-out."

" I'm out of training, as I told you," said the stranger.

" Then you must have bin a valiant basher in your day. It's a pity you let yourself go slack."

" It was not becoming that I should use my fists, except to defend the weak. I am a minister of the Lord."

" A parson ! " cried Pete.

" A minister of the Lord," repeated with some severity the man in black, " of the brotherhood named Ebenezer."

Pete remembered hearing that a new parson was coming to the local Methodists, but nothing had led him to expect such thrilling developments.

" I used to be in the fancy," said the minister, " but five years ago the Lord challenged me, and knocked me out in the first round."

Pete was following a train of thought.

" Is a minister the same as a parson ? " he asked at length.

" Is a priest of Jehovah the same as a priest of Baal ? For shame, young man ! "

" I mean can a minister do wot a Parson does ?—tell a poor feller wot's dying that he wöan't go to hell."

" Not if he's washed in the blood of the Lamb."

" That's wot I mean, surelye. Could you come and talk to a sick man about all that sort of thing ? "

A gleam came into the minister's eyes, very much the same as when he had knocked out the tramp.

" Reckon I could ! " he cried fierily. " Reckon I can snatch a brand from the burning, reckon I can find the lost piece of silver ; reckon I can save the wandering sheep, and wash it in the blood of the Lamb."

" Same as a parson ? " enquired Pete anxiously.

" Better than any mitred priest of Ammon, for I shall not vex the sinner's soul with dead works, but wash it in the crimson fountain. You trust your sick man to me, young feller—I'll wash him in blood, I'll clothe him in righteousness, I'll feed him with salvation."

" I'll justabout täake you to him, then. He asked fur a 'stablished parson, but I'd sooner far bring you, for, Lordy, if you äun't the präaperest bruiser I've ever set eyes on."

§ 13.

That was how the Rev. Roger Ades started his ministrations at Odiam. At first Reuben was disgusted. He had never before had truck with Dissenters, whom he considered low-class and unfit for anyone above a tenant farmer. He was outraged by the thought of the pastor's almost daily visits, accompanied by loud singing of hymns in Albert's bedroom. However, he did not actually forbid him the house, for Pete had brought him there, and Reuben never treated Pete exactly as he treated his other sons. Pete was the only member of his family who had so far not disgraced Odiam—except the two little boys, who were too young—and he was always careful to do nothing that might unsettle him and drive him into his brother's treacherous ways.

So the pastor of Ebenezer came unchecked, and doubtless his ministrations were appreciated, for as time went by the intervals between them grew shorter and shorter, till at last Mr. Ades was more often in the house than out of it.

Though strengthened in soul, Albert grew weaker in body, and Pete began to scamp his farm work. Even when the minister was present, he would not leave his brother. It grieved Reuben that, while outside matters prospered, indoors they should remind him of a Methodist conventicle. The house was full of hymns, they burst through the close-shut windows of Albert's bedroom and assaulted the ears of workers on Boarzell. In the evenings, when Ades was gone, Pete whistled them about the house. Reuben was ashamed; it made him blush to think that his stout churchmanship should have to put up with this. "I scarcely dare show my face in the pub, wud all this going on at höame," he remarked sorrowfully.

Meanwhile, the farm was doing well; indeed, it was almost back at its former glory. Having laid the foundations, Reuben could now think of expansion, and he engaged two more farm-hands.

He had quite changed the look of Boarzell. Instead of the swell and tumble of the heather, were now long stretches of chocolate furrows, where only the hedge mustard sometimes sprang mutinously, soon to be rooted up. Reuben, however, looked less on these than on the territories still unconquered. He would put his head on one side and contemplate the Moor from different angles, trying to size the rough patch at the top. He wondered how long it would be before it could all be his. He would have to work like a fiend if he was to do it in his lifetime. There was the Grandturzel inclosure, too . . . Then he would go and whip up his men, and make them work nearly as hard as he worked himself, so that in the evening they would complain at the Cocks of

"wot a tedious hard mäaster Mus' Backfield wur, surelye!"

One day Albert sent his father a message through Pete.

"He wanted me to tell you wot an unaccountable difference he sees in Boarzell now he's come back. He'd never have known it, 'tis so changed. All the new bit towards Doozes is justabout präaper."

Reuben said nothing, in spite of the entreaty in Pete's honest eyes, but his heart warmed towards his son. Albert had shown at last proper spirit; he had no doubt realised his baseness, and acknowledged that he had been a fool and villain to betray Odiam. Now he saw how mightily the farm prospered in spite of adversity, he praised its greatness, and no man could praise Odiam without winning a little of Reuben's goodwill. He softened towards the prodigal, and felt that he would like to see the boy—he still called him "the boy," though he was thirty-seven—and if he behaved penitently and humbly, forgive him before he died.

That evening he went up to Pete's room. The sound of voices came from it, one exceedingly loud, and it struck Reuben that "that hemmed Methody" was there. He opened the door and looked in. Albert lay propped up in the bed, his hands, wasted into claws, clasped in the attitude of prayer, his eyes protruding strangely above his sunken cheeks, where the skin was stretched on the bones. Pete knelt beside him, his eyes closed, his hands folded, like a child saying its prayers, and at the foot of the bed stood the Rev. Roger Ades, his face contorted with fervour, his arms waving in attitudes that were reminiscent of the boxing ring in spite of his efforts.

None of them saw or heard Reuben's entrance, and at that moment they all burst into a hymn:

"There's life in the crimson Fountain,
There's peace in the Blood of the Slain."

A long shudder of disgust went over Reuben's flesh. He was utterly shocked by what he saw. That such things could go on in his house struck him with horror, tinctured by shame. He went out, shutting the door noisily behind him—the softer feelings had gone; instead he felt bitterly and furiously humiliated.

The hymn faltered and stopped when the door banged, but the next moment the minister caught it up again, and hurled it after Reuben's indignant retreat:

> "My soul is all washed to whiteness,
> And I'll never be foul again.
> Salvation! Salvation full and free!"

§ 14.

Early in May, Pete came out to Reuben on Boarzell and told him that Albert was dead. Reuben felt a little awkward and a little relieved.

"He died quiet, I hope?"

"Oh, yes," said Pete, "he laid hold on the merits of Jesus."

Reuben started.

"It wur a präaper death," continued Pete; "his soul wur washed as white as wool. He wur the prodigal son come höame; he wur the Lord's lost sixpence, I reckon."

"And that son of a harlot from Little Bethel wurn't wud him, I trust?"

"No, I'm going to fetch him now."

His father opened his mouth to forbid him angrily, but changed his mind and said nothing. Pete walked off whistling—"When the cleansing Blood is poured."

Reuben could not help feeling relieved at Albert's death, but he had noticed with some alarm Pete's definitely religious phraseology. He hoped that Ades had not corrupted him from his pure churchmanship, the honourable churchmanship of the Backfields. Being

a Dissenter was only one degree better than being a Liberal, and Reuben swore to keep a firm hand over Pete in future.

That evening he and his son had their first conflict. Pete announced that he had made arrangements with Ades for Albert's funeral, and Reuben announced with equal conviction that he was hemmed if Ades had any truck in it wotsumdever. Albert should be buried according to the rites and ceremonies of the Church of England, he wasn't going to have any salvation sung over his grave. Pete, on the other hand, stuck to his point, and alarmed Reuben with more religious phraseology.

"It wur Ades wot gave him to the Lord, wot found him salvation in the Blood of the Lamb."

"I döan't care two straws about that. Albert wur born and christened Church, and he's not going to die chapel because a lousy Methody sings hymns over him when he's sick and döan't know better. If I find that feller on my pläace again, I'll break every bone in his body."

Pete angrily defended the minister, which caused Reuben fresh alarm; for in the old days when his father abused Ades he had tried to conciliate him by laying stress on the latter's prowess as a bruiser, but now he never once mentioned his fists, enlarging instead on his qualities of soul and on the fact that he had found Christ. The two theologians carried on their argument till well past bedtime, and at last separated in a great state of dogma and indignation.

In the end it was the Church that won. Reuben went over early the next morning to the Rectory, and made arrangements for Albert's funeral on the following Monday. He enlarged on the conflict he had had with Pete, and was a little dashed by the rector's want of enthusiasm.

Albert was buried with all the decent rites of the

Establishment. He was laid to rest in the Christian company of his mother and his brother George, at the bottom of the churchyard where it touched the pond; a little way from him was the old yeoman who had "never wanted anything he hadn't got, and so hadn't got anything he didn't want." It relieved Pete a little to think that from where he lay his brother could not see Boarzell—"not even if he sat up in his grave."

The funeral was dignified and impressive, and every now and then Reuben glanced across at his son with eyes that said—"Wot could Ebenezer have done compared wud this?" All the same, he was disappointed. Somehow he had expected his churchmanship to strike the rector and the curate very favourably; he had expected them metaphorically to fall on his neck; he saw himself as a champion of established Christendom, of tithes and glebes and cosy rectories and "dearly beloved brethren" on Sundays. It was humiliating to find himself ignored, indeed treated as an outsider, simply because he had not been to church for ten years. He had had his children baptised into the Establishment, and now he was burying his son according to its rites, in spite of opposition, even persecution. These parsons were ungrateful, bigoted, and blind.

Perhaps though, he thought, their behaviour was partially accounted for by that of Pete, who stood beside the grave with his eyes shut, saying "A-aaamen" at unliturgical intervals, as only Dissenters can say it.

§ 15.

Pete spent that evening with Ades, and Reuben's fireside slumbers were unrestful because he missed Pete's accustomed snore from the other end of the settle. The next morning his son did not appear, though there was plenty of work to be done in the hop-fields.

The young hops were now well above ground, and exposed to the perils of blight, so Reuben and Beatup were spraying them with insect-killer, badly in need of a third man to do the mixing.

"Where's Pete?" asked Reuben.

"I dunno—äun't seen un this mornun. Ah—thur he be!"

"Where?"

"Cöaming up by the brook, surelye."

Reuben stared in amazement. The approaching figure undoubtedly was Pete, but a Pete so changed by circumstances and demeanour as to be almost unrecognisable. He wore his Sunday black clothes, which—as, with the exception of the funeral, he had not put them on for ten years—were something of a misfit. On his head was a black hat with a wide flapping brim, he walked with a measured step and his hands folded in front of him.

"Well," cried Reuben, calling abuse to the rescue of surprise—"you hemmed lazy good-fur-nothing, you!—wud all the Glotten hay to be cut, and ten acres o' hops to be sprayed, and you go laying in bed lik a lady, and then come out all dressed as if you wur going to church. Where's your corduroys?"

"In my box—you can clöathe the naked wud 'em—I'm never going to put 'em on no more."

"I'm hemmed if I'll have you working on my farm in that foolery. You'll mäake us the laughing-stock of Peasmarsh. You've got Ebenezer on the brain, you have, and you can justabout git it off again."

"I'm never going to do another ströake of wark on your farm as long as I live. Salvation's got me."

Reuben dropped the insect-killer.

"I'm the Lord's lost lamb," announced Pete.

"The Lord's lost——!" cried his father angrily. "You täake off them blacks, and git to work lik a human being."

"I tell you I'm never going to work fur you agäun. I'm going forth to spread the Word. Salvation's got me."

"You wait till *I* git you, that's all," and Reuben ran at Pete.

"Kip off, or I'll slosh you one on the boko," cried the Lord's lost lamb swinging up a vigorous pair of fists. Reuben breathed a sigh of relief.

"There—I knew as there wur reason in you, Pete. You wöan't go and leave your fäather lik the rest, all fur a hemmed Methody."

"Hemmed Methody! That's how you spik of the man wot's säaved my soul. I tell you as there I wur lost in trespasses and sins, and now I'm washed white as wool—there wur my evil doings sticking to my soul lik maggots to a dead rat, and now my soul's washed in the Blood of the Lamb, and I'm going out to spread the Word."

"Where are you going?"

"Unto the ends of the earth—Hastings. There's a friend of Ades there wot'll guide me into the Spirit's ways."

"But you'll never leave me at the time of the hay-harvest, and Emily due to calve in another month?"

"I tell you I'm shut of your farm—it's wot's led me astray from a lad. Instead of settin' and reading godly books and singing wud the saints I've gone and ploughed furrers and carted manure; I've thought only of the things of the flesh, I've walked lik accursed Adam among the thistles. But now a Voice says, 'work no more!—go and spread the Word!' And if you're wise, fäather, you'll cöame too, and you, Beatup. You'll flee from the wrath to cöame, when He shall shäake the earth and the elimunts shall dissolve in fervient heat, and He . . ."

"Have adone do wud your preaching. I'm ashamed

of you, led astray by lunies as if you wur no better nor poor Harry. You're a hemmed lousy traitor, you are, the worst of 'em all."

"I'm only fleeing from the wrath to cöame—and if you're wise you'll foller me. This farm is the city of destruction, I tell you, it's a snare of the devil, it's Naboth's vineyard, it's the lake that burneth wud fire and brimstone. Cöame out of her, cöame out of her, my peoples!"

Reuben was paralysed. His jaw worked convulsively, and he looked at Pete as if he were a specially new and pestilential form of blight.

"Save yourself, fäather," continued the evangelist, "and give up all the vain desires of the flesh. Is this a time to buy olive-yards and vineyards? Beware lest there cöame upon you as it did to him wot purchaised a field, the reward of inquiety, and falling headlong he bust asunder in the midst and his bowels goshed out——"

But Reuben had found his voice.

"Git out of this!" he shouted. "I wöan't stand here and listen to you miscalling the farm wot's bred you and fed you over thirty year. Git out, and never think you'll come back again. I'm shut of you. I döan't want no more of you—I'm out of the wood now, I've got all the work out of you I've needed, so you can go, and spread your hemmed Word, and be hemmed. I'm shut of you."

Pete fixed upon his father a gaze meant to inspire the utmost terrors of conscience, then turned on his heel and slowly walked away.

The sight of his broad black back disappearing among the hop-bines was too much for Reuben. He picked up the can of insect-killer and hurled it after his son, splashing his respectability from head to foot with the stinking fluid. Pete flung round with his fists up, then suddenly dropped them and raised his eyes instead.

" You wudn't daur do that if I hadn't been saved ! " he shouted.

Then he walked off, beautiful of soul no doubt, but highly unpleasant of body.

BOOK VII

THE END IN SIGHT

§ 1.

THE next five years were comparatively uneventful. All that stood out of them was the steady progress of the farm. It fattened, it grew, it crept up Boarzell as the slow tides softly flood a rock.

Reuben was now alone at Odiam with his two small children and Harry. David and Bill, unlike their predecessors, did not start their career as farm-hands till well past babyhood. Reuben no longer economised in labour—he had nearly a dozen men in regular employ, to say nothing of casuals. Sometimes he thought regretfully of the stalwart sons who were to have worked for him, to have run the farm without any outside help . . . but that dream belonged to bygone days, and he resolutely put it from him. After all, his posse of farm-hands was the envy of the neighbourhood; no one in Peasmarsh employed so many.

Reuben himself was still able for a great deal of work. Though over sixty, he still had much of the vigour, as he had all the straightness, of his youth. Work had not bent him and crippled him, as it had crippled Beatup, his junior by several years. The furnace of his pride and resolution seemed to have dried the damps steamed up by the earth from her revengeful wounds, so that rheumatism—the plague of the labourer on the soil—had done no worse for him than shooting pains in the winter with a slight thickening of his joints.

His hair had been grey for years, and as he grew older it did not whiten, but stayed the colour of polished iron, straight, shining, and thick as a boy's. He had lost two back teeth, and made a tremendous fuss about them, saying it was all the fault of the dentist in Rye, who preferred a shilling extraction to a threepenny lotion—but the rest of his teeth were as good as ever, though at last a trifle discoloured by smoking.

His face was a network of wrinkles. He was not the sort of countryman whose skin old age stretches smoothly over the bones and reddens benignly as a sun-warmed apple. On the contrary, he had grown swarthier with the years, the ruddy tints had been hardened into the brown, and from everywhere, from the corners of his eyes, of his mouth, of his nose, across his forehead, along his cheeks, under his chin, spread a web of lines, some mere hair-tracery on the surface, others wrinkled deep, others ploughed in like the furrows of his own fields.

Harry had not aged so successfully. He was terribly bent, and some of his joints were swollen grotesquely, though he had not had so much truck as Reuben with the earth and her vapours. He was so thin that he amounted to little more than shrivelled yellow skin over some twisted bones, and yet he was wiry and clung desperately to life. Reuben was sorry for this—his brother annoyed him. Harry grew more irritating with old age. He still played his fiddle, though he had now forgotten every semblance of a tune, and if it were taken away from him by some desperate person he would raise such an outcry that it would soon be restored as a lesser evil. He hardly ever spoke to anyone, but muttered to himself. "Salvation's got me!" he would croak, for his mind had been inexplicably stamped by Pete's outrage, and he forgot all about that perpetual wedding which had puzzled him for so many years. "Salvation's got me!" he would yell, suddenly waking in the middle

of the night—keeping the memory of the last traitor always green.

But it was for other reasons that Reuben most wished that Harry would die. Harry was a false note, a discord in his now harmonious scheme. He was a continual reminder of the power of Boarzell, and would occasionally sweep Reuben's thoughts away from those fat corn-fields licking at the crest to that earliest little patch down by Totease, where the Moor had drunk up its first blood. He called himself a fool, but he could not help seeing something sinister and fateful in Harry, scraping tunelessly at his fiddle, or repeating over and over again some wandering echo from the outside world which had managed to reach his dungeoned brain. Reuben wished he would die, and so did the farm-boy who slept with him, and the dairy-woman who fed him at meals.

The only people who would have been sorry if he had died were the children. Harry was popular with them, as he had been with baby Fanny long ago, because he made funny faces and emitted strange, unexpected sounds. He was unlike the accepted variety of grown-up people, who were seldom amusing or surprising, and one could take liberties with him, such as one could not take with fäather or Maude. Also, being blind, one could play on him the most fascinating tricks.

These tricks were never unkind, for David and William were the most benevolent little boys. They saw life through a golden mist, it smelt of milk and apples, it was full of soft lowings and bleatings and cheepings, of gentle noses to stroke and little downy things to hold. For the first time since it became Reuben's, Odiam made children happy. The farm which had been a galley and a prison to those before them, was an enchanted land of adventure to these two. Old Beatup, who remembered earlier things, would sometimes smile when he saw them trotting hand in hand about the yard, playing long hours in the orchard, and now and then

pleading as a special favour to be allowed to feed the chickens, or help fetch the cows home. He seemed to see the farm peopled by little ghosts who had never dared trot about aimlessly, or had time to play, and had fed the fowls and fetched the cows not as a treat and an adventure, but as a dreary part of the day's grind . . . he reflected that " the mäaster had learned summat by the others, surelye."

Of course, one reason why David and Billy were so free was because of the growing prosperity of the farm, which no longer made it necessary to save and scrape. But on the other hand, it was a fact that the mäaster had learned summat by the others. He was resolved that, come what might, he would keep these boys. They should not leave him like their brothers; and since harshness had failed to keep those at home, he would now try a slacker rule. He was growing old, and he wanted to think that at his death Odiam would pass into loyal and loving hands, he wanted to think of its great traditions being carried on in all their glory. Sometimes he would have terrible dreams of Odiam being divided at his death, split up into allotments and small-holdings, scrapped into building plots. Such dreams made him look with hungry tenderness at the two little figures trotting hand in hand about the orchard and the barns.

§ 2.

It was about that time that the great Lewin case came on at the Old Bailey. The papers were full of it, and Reuben could not suppress a glow of pride when Maude the dairy-woman read out the name of Richard Backfield as junior counsel for the defence. But his pride was to be still further exalted. The senior counsel collapsed with some serious illness on the very eve of the trial, and Richard stepped into his shoes. The papers were now full of his name, it was on everyone's lips

throughout the kingdom, and especially in the public-houses between Rye and the Kent border. Men stopped drinking at the Cocks when Reuben came in, and women ran down to their garden gates when he passed by. Reuben himself did not say much, but he now regularly took in a daily paper, and being able to recognise the name of Backfield in print, sat chasing the magic word through dark labyrinths of type, counting the number of its appearances and registering them on the back of his corn accounts.

"How's the Lewin cäase gitting on?" someone would ask at the Cocks, and Reuben would answer:

"Valiant—my näum wur sixteen times in the päaper this mornun."

He almost taught himself to read by this means, for it was the first time he had ever studied a printed page, and he had soon picked up several words besides Backfield. Not that he took much interest in the case beyond Richard's—that is to say, Odiam's—share in it, but soon it became clear that Richard was leading it to marvellous developments. Lewin was a bank-manager accused of colossal frauds, and Richard amazed the country by dragging a couple of hitherto respected banking knights into the business. At one time it was thought he would get an acquittal by this, but Richard was a barrister, not a detective, and he brilliantly got his client acquitted on a point of law, which though it may have baffled a little the romantic enthusiasm of his newspaper admirers, made his name one to conjure with in legal circles, so that briefs were no longer matters of luck and prayer.

His fortune was made by the Lewin case. He wrote home and told his father that he had now "arrived," and was going to marry Anne Bardon.

The excitement created by his defence of Lewin was nothing to that which now raged in Rye and Peasmarsh. Reuben was besieged by the curious, who found relief

for a slight alloy of envy by pointing out how unaccountable well the young man had done for himself by running away.

"Reckon you dudn't think as how it 'ud turn out lik this, or you wudn't have been in such tedious heart about it."

"I can't say as I'm pleased at his marrying Miss Bardon," Reuben would say. "She's ten year older than he if she's a day. 'Twas she who asked him, I reckon. He could have done better fur himself if he'd stayed at höame."

§ 3.

Reuben had bought thirty-five more acres of Boarzell in '81, and thirty in '84. The first piece was on the Flightshot side of the Moor, by Cheat Land, the second stretched from the new ground by Totease over to Burntbarns. Now only about fifty acres, including the Fairplace and the crest, remained to be won outside the Grandturzel inclosure. Bardon publicly announced his intention never to sell the Fair-place to Backfield. Flightshot and Odiam had not been drawn together by Richard's marriage. At first Reuben had feared that the Squire might take liberties on the strength of it, and had been stiffer than ever in his unavoidable intercourse with the Manor. But Bardon had been, if anything, stiffer still. He thoroughly disapproved of Backfield as an employer of labour—some of his men were housed, with their families, in two old barns converted into cottages at the cheapest rate—and as he was too hard up to refuse to sell him Boarzell, he could express his disgust only by his attitude. Fine shades of manner were apt to be lost on Reuben, but about the refusal to sell the Fair-place there could be no mistake.

Meantime he cast covetous and hopeful eyes on the Grandturzel inclosure. Realf was doing nothing with it, and his affairs were not so prosperous as they used to be.

His abandonment of the struggle had not changed his luck, and a run of bad luck—the usual farmer's tale of poor harvests, dead cows, blighted orchards, and low prices—had plunged Grandturzel nearly as deep as Odiam had once been. Realf had shown himself without recuperative powers; he economised, but inefficiently, and Reuben foresaw that the day would come when he would be forced to part with some of his land. He was in no immediate hurry for this, as he would be all the readier to spend his money in a few years' time, but occasionally he gave himself the treat of going up to the Grandturzel inclosure and inspecting it from the fence, planning exactly what he would do with it when it was his.

More than once Realf and Tilly saw him in the distance, a tall, sinister figure, haunting their northern boundaries.

"Fäather's after our land," said Tilly, and shuddered.

§ 4.

The little boys grew big and went to school. This time it was not to the dame's school in the village, for that had collapsed before the new board-school which had risen to madden Reuben's eyes with the spectacle of an educated populace. They went to Rye Grammar School and learned Latin and Greek like gentlemen. There was something new in Reuben's attitude towards these boys, for his indulgence had deeper roots than expediency. Sometimes of an evening he would go to the bottom of the Totease lane, where it joins the Peasmarsh road, and wait there for his sons' return. They would see him afar off, and run to meet him, and they would all three walk home together, arm-in-arm perhaps.

He would have been exceedingly indignant if in bygone days anyone had ever hinted that he did not

love the sons and daughters whom he had beaten, kicked out of doors, frustrated, suppressed, or driven to calamity. All the same, he acknowledged that there was a difference between his feelings towards Rose's children and Naomi's. Though Naomi was the wife more pleasant to remember, Rose's were the children he loved best. They had not grown up in the least like her, and he was glad of that, for he would have hated to confront again her careless, lovely face, or the provoking little teeth of her smile ; they were Backfields, dark of hair and swarthy of skin, David with grey eyes, William with brown.

When he saw them running along the lane from school, or tramping the fields together—they were always together—or helping with the hops or the hay, his heart would stir with a warm, unwonted sense of fatherhood, not just the proud paternal impulse which had visited him when he held his new-born babies in his arms, but something belonging more to the future than the present, to the days when they should carry on Odiam after his death. For the first time he had sons whom he looked upon not merely as labourers to help him in his work, but as men created in his own image to inherit that work and reap its fruits when he was gone.

He was pleased to see their evident love of the farm. They begged him not to keep them too long at school, for they wanted to come home and work on Odiam. So he took David away when he was sixteen, and William when he was fifteen the next year.

Meantime it seemed as if in spite of his absorption in his new family he was not to be entirely cut off from the old. In the summer of '87, just after the Jubilee, he had a letter from Richard, announcing that he and his wife were coming for a week or so to Rye. Reuben had not heard of Richard for some years, and had not seen him since he left Odiam—he had been asked to the wedding, but had refused to go. Now Richard expressed

the hope that he would soon see his father. His was a nature that mellows and softens in prosperity, and though he had not forgotten the miseries of his youth, he was too happy to let them stand between him and Reuben now that they were only memories.

Anne was not so disposed to forgive—she had her brother's score as well as her husband's to settle, and concealed from no one that she thought her father-in-law a brutal and conscienceless old slave-driver whose success was a slur on the methods of Providence. She refused to accompany Richard on his first visit to Odiam, but spent the afternoon at Flightshot, while he tramped with Reuben over the land that had once been so hateful to him.

Reuben, though he would not have confessed it, was much taken with his son's appearance. Richard looked taller, which was probably because he held himself better, more proudly erect ; his face seemed also subtly changed ; he had almost a legal profile, due partly no doubt to a gold-rimmed pince-nez. He looked astonishingly clean-shaven, he wore good clothes, and his hands were slim and white, not a trace of uncongenial work remaining. He had quite lost his Sussex accent, and Reuben vaguely felt that he was a credit to him.

Their attitude, at first constrained, soon became more cordial than either would have thought possible in earlier days. Richard made no tactless references to his brothers and sisters, and admired and praised everything, even the pigsties that had used to make him sick. They went out into the fields and inspected the late lambs, Richard showing that he had lost every trace of shepherd-lore that had ever been his. His remarks on shearing gave Reuben a very bad opinion of the English Bar ; however, they parted in a riot of mutual civility, and Richard asked his father to dine with him at the Mermaid in a couple of days.

Anne was furious when she heard of the invitation.

"You know I don't want to meet your father—and I'm sure he'll disgrace us."

"He's more likely to amuse us," said Richard; "he's a character, and I shall enjoy studying him for the first time from an unbiassed view-point."

"It won't be unbiassed if he disgraces us."

However, Reuben did not disgrace them. On the contrary, more than one admiring glance drifted to the Backfields' table, and remarks were overheard about "that picturesque old man." Reuben had dressed himself with care in a suit of dark grey cloth and the flowered waistcoat he had bought when he married Rose. His collar was so high and stiff that he could hardly get his chin over it, his hair was brushed and oiled till its grey thickness shone like the sides of a man-o'-war, and his hands looked quite clean by artificial light.

Richard had invited his young half-brothers too, for they had been at school when he visited Odiam. They struck him as quite ordinary-looking boys, dressed in modern reach-me-downs, and only partially inheriting their father's good looks. As for them, they were cowed and abashed past all words. It seemed incredible that this resplendent being in the white shirt-front and gold-rimmed eye-glasses was their brother, and the lady with the hooked nose and the diamonds their sister-in-law. They scarcely ventured to speak, and were appalled by the knives and forks and glasses that lay between them and their dinner.

Reuben too was appalled by them, but would not for worlds have shown it. He attacked the knives and forks with such vigour that he did not get really involved in them till the joint, and as he refused no drink the waiter offered he soon had all his glasses harmlessly occupied. Nor was he at a loss for conversation. He was resolved that neither Richard nor Anne should ignore the greatness of his farm; if only he could stir

up a spark of home-sickness in his son's white-shirted breast, his triumph would be complete.

"I reckon I'm through wud my bad luck now—Odiam's doing valiant. I'm shut of all the lazy-bones, Grandturzel's beat, and I've naun to stand agäunst me."

"What about Nature?" asked Richard, readjusting his pince-nez and thrusting forward his chin, whereby it was always known in court that he meant to "draw out" the witness.

"Nature!" snorted Reuben—"wot's Nature, I'd lik to know?"

"The last word on most subjects," said Richard.

"Well, is it? I reckon it äun't the last word on your wife."

"I beg your pardon!"—Anne's chin came forward so like Richard's that one might gather he had borrowed the trick from her.

"Well, 'carding to Nature, ma'am, and saving your presence, you're forty-five year if you're a day. I remember the very 'casion you wur born. Well, if I may be so bold, you döan't look past thirty. How's that? Just because you know some dodges worth two of Nature's, you've a way of gitting even wud her. Now if a lady can bust Nature at her dressing-täable, I reckon I can bust her on my farm."

"This is most interesting," said Anne icily, raising her lorgnette and looking at Reuben as if he were a bad smell.

"He means to be complimentary," said Richard.

"Reckon I do!" cried Reuben genially, warmed by various liquors—"naun shall say I döan't know a fine woman when I see one. And I reckon as me and my darter-in-law are out after the säum thing—and that's the beating of Nature, wot you seem to set such a store by, Richard."

"Well, she'll have you both in the end, anyhow."

"She! no—she wöan't git me."

"She'll get you when you die."

"Oh, I döan't count that—that's going to good earth."

"Perhaps she'll get you before then."

Reuben banged the table with his fist.

"I'm hemmed if she does. She'd have got me long ago if she'd ever been going to—when I wur young and my own hot blood wur lik to betray me. But I settled her then, and I'll settle her to the end of time. Mark my words, Richard my boy, there's always some way of gitting even wud her. Wot's nature?—nature's a thing; and a man's a—why he's a man, and he can always go one better than a thing. Nature mäakes potato-blight, so man mäakes Bordeaux spray; nature mäakes calf-husk, so man mäakes linseed oil; nature mäakes lice, so man mäakes lice-killer. Man's the better of nature all along, and I döan't mind proving it."

Having thus delivered himself under the combined fire of the lorgnette and the pince-nez, Reuben poured himself out half a tumblerful of *crème de menthe* and drank the healths of them both with their children, whereat Anne rose quickly from the table and sought refuge in the drawing-room.

It was after ten o'clock when her father-in-law and his two silent boys climbed into their trap and started homewards over the clattering cobbles of Mermaid Street. In the trap the two silent boys found their tongues, and fell to discussing their brother Richard in awestruck voices. They whispered about his dinner, his wife, his hands, his eye-glasses, his voice, while old Dorrington picked his way up Playden Hill in the white starshine. Reuben heard them as if in a dream as he leaned forward over the reins, his eyes fixed on Capella, bright and cold above Bannister's Town. He had drunk more liberally and more variously than he had ever drunk in his life, but he carried his liquor well, and all

he was conscious of was a slight exaltation, a feeling of triumph, as if all these huddled woods, lightless farms, and cold winking stars were in some strange way his by conquest, the tokens of his honour. The wind lapped round him, baffing at his neck—it sighed in the woods, and rocked them gently towards the east. In the south Orion hung above Stonelink, with Sirius at the end of his sword . . . the constellation of the Ram was high . . .

Then suddenly his sons' voices floated up to him in his dream.

"I wish I could be like Richard, Bill."

"So do I—but I reckon we never shall."

"Not if we stick to the farm. Did you notice that ring on his little finger?"

"Yes, quite a plain one, but it looked justabout fine."

"And he had a gold watch-chain across his waistcoat."

"I reckon he's done well fur himself by running away."

"Yes, if he'd stayed he'd never have married Miss Bardon and had his name in all the papers."

"We'll never do anything fur ourselves if we stay at Odiam."

"No—but we'll have to stay. Fäather will make us."

"He couldn't make Richard stay."

Reuben listened as if in a nightmare—the blood in his veins seemed to turn to ice. He could hardly believe his ears.

"Richard's made his fortune by quitting Odiam. 'Tis a good place, but he'd never have done half so valiant for himself if he'd stayed."

Reuben pulled himself together, and swinging round cuffed both speakers unaccustomedly.

"Döan't let me hear another word of that hemmed nonsense. If you think as Richard's bettered himself by running away from Odiam, you're unaccountable

mistaken. Wot's a dirty lawyer compared wud a farmer as farms three hundred acres, and owns 'em into the bargain? All my boys have busted and ruined themselves by running away—Richard's the only one that's done anything wotsumdever . . . and if he's done well, there's one as has done better, and that's his fäather wot stayed at home."

§ 5.

About three years later Sir Ralph Bardon died. He died of typhus caught on one of Reuben's insanitary cottages, where he had been nursing a sick boy. The village was inclined to look upon him as a martyr and Reuben as his murderer, but Reuben himself preserved a contemptuous attitude. "If I'd wanted anything as much as he wanted them houses o' mine, I'm hemmed if I wudn't have had 'em," he said, "and all he could do wur to die of 'em"—and he spat.

Sir Ralph had never married and there was no direct heir; Anne was about as likely to produce offspring as a Latin grammar, and the property went to a distant cousin, Eustace Fleet. The very name of Bardon was now extinct. For two hundred years it had been coupled with Flightshot and Whig politics and the idea of a gentleman, till the last had finally been the downfall of the other two. The race of Bardon had died of its own virtues.

Reuben's hopes of the Fair-place now revived, and he at once approached the new Squire with a view to purchase; but Sir Eustace turned out to be quite as wrong-headed as Sir Ralph on the matter of popular rights.

"Of course I know the Fair has no legal title to this ground, but one must respect public feeling. I will sell you the forty acres adjoining the crest with pleasure, Mr. Backfield, they are no use to me, and you certainly seem to do wonders with the land when you get it—but

the Place itself must be preserved for the people. I'm sure you understand."

Reuben didn't, nor pretended that he did.

He started licking his forty acres into shape, with many inward vows that he would have the rest of them soon, he was hemmed if he didn't. He was on the high ground now, he could throw a stone into the clump of firs which still mocked his endeavours. The soil was all hard and flinty, matted with heather roots and the fibres of gorse. Reuben's men grumbled and cursed as the earth crumbled and rattled against their spades, which sometimes broke on the big flints and bits of limestone. They scoffed incredulously when old Beatup told them that the lower pastures and the Totease oatfields had once been like this.

Boarzell was almost unrecognisable now. When one climbed the Forstal Hill behind Peasmarsh and looked southward, one no longer saw a great roughness of Moor couching like something wild and untrapped in the midst of the tame fields and domestic cottages. The fields had licked up its sides till all they had left was the brown and golden crest with its central clump of firs. Behind this to the north was the Grandturzel inclosure, but Reuben's land was nibbling round the edge of it, and everyone knew that Grandturzel would not be able to hold out much longer.

Opinion in Peasmarsh was divided. There was a general grudging admiration of the man who seemed able, in defiance of the Scriptures, to make Leviathan his servant. No one could deny that Backfield had performed a job which the neighbourhood from the first had declared to be impossible. He was disliked—not because anyone particularly envied him the land he bought so eagerly and so strenuously shaped, but because of his utter disregard of what other men prized and his willingness to sacrifice it for the sake of what they did not prize at all. He was a living insult to their

hearths, their homes, their wives, their children, their harmless recreations, the delights of their flesh, all those things which he had so readily set aside to win his great ambition. It was not for what he wanted that they hated him so much as for the things he did not want.

However, everyone viewed with dislike and suspicion his covetous eye cast on the Fair-place. He might have the rest of Boarzell and welcome, for no other man had any use for flints, but the Fair was sacred to them through the generations, and they gauged his sacrilegious desire to rob them of it for his own ends. He might have the Grandturzel inclosure, though all the village sympathised with the beaten Realf—beaten, they said, because he hadn't it in him to be as hard-hearted as the old Gorilla, and sacrifice his wife and children to his farm—but they would far rather see Grandturzel swallowed up than Boarzell Fair.

When his failure to buy the crest became known there were great rejoicings throughout Peasmarsh. The Fair that year was more than usually crowded, and the merriment was increased by the sight of Reuben stalking among the booths, and glaring at them as if he wished them all at blazes.

§ 6.

The boys were now sixteen and eighteen, fine, manly young fellows, working cheerfully on Odiam and rejoicing their father's heart. Reuben watched over them sometimes with an odd kind of anxiety—they were so satisfactory that he felt it could not last. He remembered that conversation he had overheard in the trap on the way home from Rye, and though nothing had happened since to remind him of it or cause him fresh alarm, he could never quite shake off the cold thrills it had given him.

Besides, David and William had come to a dangerous age, they were beginning to form opinions and ideas of

their own, they were beginning to choose their own friends and pastimes. But what Reuben distrusted most was their affection for each other, it was more fundamental to his anxieties than any outside independence. From childhood they had been inseparable, but in past years he had put this down to the common interests of their play, for there were few boys of their own age on the neighbouring farms. But now they were grown up the devotion persisted—they still did everything together, work or play. Reuben knew that they had secrets from him, their union gave him a sense of isolation. They were fond of him, but he was not to them what they were to each other, and his remoteness seemed to grow with the years.

In his alarm he made plans to separate them. He discovered that the big attic they slept in was not healthy, and moved their beds to two rooms divided by his own. He now felt that he had put an end to those bedtime conferences which must have done so much to unite the brothers and set him at a distance.

His vigilance increased when their first love affairs began. At first they would gabble innocently to him about pretty girls they had seen in Rye, but they soon found out such conversation was most unwelcome. Reuben looked upon love as the biggest curse and snare of life ; if David and William fell in love they would lose interest in Odiam, they would do something silly like Robert, or mad like Caro, or bad like Rose. Love was the enemy of Odiam, and Reuben having trodden it down himself was not going to see it rise and stamp on his boys. He gave them the benefit of his experience in no measured terms :

" If you fall in love wud a gal you can't say no to her, and she'll find it out lamentable soon. When either of you boys finds a nice strong, sensible gal, wud a bit o' money, and not self-willed, such as 'ull be a good darter-in-law to me, I shan't have nothing to say agäunst it.

But döan't you go running after petticoats and mäake fools of yourselves and disgrace Odiam, and call it being in love. Love mäakes you soft, and if you're soft you might just as well be buried fur all the good you're likely to do yourself."

David and William seemed much impressed, and Reuben congratulated himself. Two days later he went into the dairy to give an order, and saw one of the dairy girls bending over a pan of cream. Something in her attitude and in the soft curly down on the nape of her neck reminded him of Naomi and that early courting scene, now nearly fifty years ago; but before he had time to recall it, David came in by another door, not seeing his father, and running lightly up to the dairy-maid suddenly kissed the back of her neck and ran away. She turned round with a scream, just in time to see him disappearing through one door, while in the other stood Reuben with grimly folded arms. He gave her a week's wages and sent her away.

"Where's Agnes?" asked David with laboured carelessness a day or two later.

"She wasted her time," said Reuben, "so I got shut of her."

"She's gone!"

"Yes—back to her parents at Tonbridge"—and Reuben grinned.

David said no more, but for the rest of the day he seemed glum and abstracted. In the evening Reuben found him sitting at the corn accounts, staring through the open window into the dusk.

"Wot's fretting you, boy?" he asked.

"Naun—I'm thinking."

Once or twice Reuben caught him in the same mood, and questioned him. But David still answered:

"I'm thinking."

§ 7.

That autumn David and William went to Newhaven to see the Rye Football Club play the West Sussex United. They had more than once gone on such jaunts together, and on this occasion, trains being difficult, they put up for the night at a small hotel near the port. It was the first time they had spent a night away from Odiam, and a certain thrill attached to it.

When the match was over they went for a stroll on the parade. There was not much daylight left, but the evening was warm, and the parade was crowded with saunterers. The young men were glad to think that there was no homeward train to be caught, or account of the day's doings to be given to their father. He always asked minutely how they spent their time, and it annoyed them a little.

To-night they would walk and sit on the parade till supper time, then go to some coffee-house, and wind up at a music-hall. It was a gay programme and they discussed it happily, glanced at the passers-by, inspected the empty bandstand, and finally sat down on one of the seats to watch the fishing-boats trim their lamps in the amethyst fog of the sea. For some time they talked about the terrible licking the United had given Rye, arguing about this or that player, and speculating as to what would be the Club's fate at Hythe next week.

It was David who drew William's attention to the woman sitting at the other end of their seat. David piqued himself on his knowledge of the world.

"She's a—you know," he said.

William peeped round his brother's shoulder.

"How can you tell?"

"Why, you kid, it's as plain as the nose on your face—look at her paint."

Bill looked, his eyes opening wider than ever. She

certainly was a disreputable female, or there was no judging by appearances. She wore a big frowsy hat trimmed with roses and ears of corn, under which her thick black hair was held up by several tawdry pins; her face was more lavishly than artistically adorned with rouge and *blanc de perle*, and she pulled a cape of lavender velvet closely round her shoulders as if she were cold—which might well have been, for, as far as they could see, her bodice consisted almost entirely of lace.

"It's early for her to be prowling," said the man of the world. "I reckon she's having just a breath of fresh air before she starts work."

"Where'll she go then?" asked Billy.

"Oh, to the more crowded streets, round about the pubs and that."

"I wonder how much she mäakes at it."

"Not much, I reckon. She's a very low-class sort, and not at all young."

"Täake care—she might hear you."

"Oh, don't you worry," said the lady blandly; "I like listening to you, and I was only waiting till you'd stopped before I introduced myself."

Bill gasped, and David forgot that he was a man of the world, and sidled against his brother.

"Don't you know me?" continued the siren, tilting her hat back from her face.

"No-o-o."

"Ever heard of your sister Caro?"

Both boys started, and stared at her in utter blankness.

"Well, it wasn't to be expected as you'd recognise me. You were only little boys, and I've changed a bit. Maybe I shouldn't have spoken to you—got no decent feelings, some people would say; but I justabout couldn't help it. I heard you call each other David and Bill, and talk about Odiam and that, so I'd have known

you even if you hadn't been the dead spit of your father."

The boys still didn't seem to have much to say, so she continued:

"I heard of your brother Pete the other day—never knew he'd left home till I saw his name down to preach at Piddinghoe Mission Hall last month. He's called Salvation Pete now, as I daresay you know, and I half thought of going to hear him, only times are so bad I couldn't afford an evening off. When did he leave Odiam?—I should like some news of home."

"He quitted years ago, when we were little chaps. Salvation got him."

"I reckon that must have come hard on fäather—he always was unaccountable set on Pete. Heard anything of Tilly lately?"

"No, nothing particular. But fäather's going to buy the Grandturzel inclosure."

"And Rose?"

"Who's Rose?"

"Your mother, my precious innocents. But look here, you shall ask me to supper—it'll only be doing the decent thing by me—and you shall tell me about them all at Odiam—as used to be at Odiam, rather, for I reckon there's nobody but yourselves there now."

David and William looked at each other uneasily; however, there was nothing else to be done, and also a certain excitement and curiosity inspired them. So they set out with Caro to an eating-house chosen by herself in a small fish-smelling back street. They were much too embarrassed to order supper, so Caro good-naturedly did this for them—fish and chips, and three bottles of six ale.

"I don't often come here," she said—"this is a bit too classy for me. I go mostly to the coffee stalls down by the harbour. You mustn't think as I'm coining money at this, you know. I work mostly among the

fishermen, and they're a seedy lot. I started up town, but I'm not so young as I was, and sometimes even at the harbour I find it unaccountable hard to git off."

With the gas-light flaring on her raddled face, showing up mercilessly the tawdriness and shoddiness of her clothes, which reeked of a cheap scent, the boys did not find it hard to believe that she often had a struggle to "git off"—indeed, it was a mystery how any man, however unfastidious, however fuddled, could kiss or take kisses from this bundle of rags and bones and paint. Caro seemed to notice the disparaging look.

"Oh, I'm a bit off colour to-night, but I can tell you I was a fine girl when I went away with Joe—and all the time I lived with him, too, first at the Camber and then at New Romney; there was many as 'ud have been proud to git me from him. But I stuck to him faithful, I did, till one morning I woke up and found him gone, off on a voyage to Australia—wonder if he met Robert—having given me over to a pal of his for five pounds and a set of oilskins. Oh, I can tell you I took on something awful—I wasn't used to men in those days. But Joe's pal he was a decent chap—there was nothing the matter with him save that he wasn't Joe. He was unaccountable good to me, and I stayed with him three years—and then I hooked it, scarcely knew why. I got a post as barmaid in Seaford, but the landlord took up with me and his missus chucked me out. And now I'm here."

"Have—have you been here long?" stammered David, feeling he must say something.

"Three year or so. I started up town. But we've spoken enough about me. Let's hear about you, and the farm. How's Richard?"

The boys told her; they described their prosperous brother with his white shirt-front, his pince-nez, his ring, and his high-born wife. As they talked they grew more at their ease.

"Well," said Caro, "I reckon he got away in time."

"From what?"

"From Odiam, of course. I stayed too long. I stayed till I was half killed by the place. If I'd gone off as a young girl I reckon I'd have done well by myself, but I waited on till I was ready to take anything that was going, and when you're like that it's too late."

"I shouldn't think Richard was sorry he left."

"No—and mark you, nor am I. It 'ud have been worse for me if I'd stayed. I'm miserable in a different way from what I was there—somehow the life's easier. I'm not happy, but I'm jolly. I'm not good, but I'm pleasant-like. It's all a change for the better. See?"

"Then you don't wish as you wur back again?"

"Back! Back with fäather! Not me! Now let's hear some more about him—does he ever speak to you of your mother?"

For the rest of the meal they discussed the absent ones—Rose, Robert, Albert, Benjamin, Tilly, the boys hearing a great deal that had never come to their ears before. Caro ordered two more bottles of six, and in the end the party became quite convivial, and David and William, forgetting the strangeness of it all, were sorry when their sister at last stood up and announced that she must wobble off or she'd be late.

"You'll tell father you met me?" she said as they left the eating-house.

David and William looked at each other, and hesitated.

"You've no call to be ashamed of me," said Caro rather irritably.

"We—we äun't ashamed of you."

"That's right—for you've no call to be. I was driven to this, couldn't help myself. Besides, I'm no worse than a lot of women wot you call respectable—at least, I put some sort of a price on myself, if it's only five shillings. Now good night, young men, and thank you

for a very pleasant evening. I don't suppose as you'll ever see me again. And mind—you tell father as, no matter the life I lead and the knocks I get, I've never once, not once, regretted the day I ran off from his old farm. Now mind—you tell him that."

§ 8.

The boys told him. Reuben listened in silence save for one ejaculation of " the dirty bitch ! "

David nudged William.

" And she asked us particular to say as she'd never regretted the day she left Odiam, or wished herself back there, nuther."

" She wur purty säafe to say that—for who'd have her back, I'd lik to know ? Larmentable creature she always wur, spanneling around lik a mangy cat. Always thin and always miserable—I'm glad to be shut of her But she seemed cheery when you saw her ? "

" Unaccountable cheery—and she drank three bottles of six ale."

" Um," said Reuben.

The boys had one or two secret talks about Caro. She also stimulated that habit of " thinking " which their father so thoroughly disapproved of. Somehow their encounter with her, combined with their encounter with Richard, seemed to have modified their enthusiasm for Odiam. They could not help comparing that supper at Newhaven with that dinner at Rye, and wondering if it was true what she had said about Richard having got away in time, whereas she had been too late.

" And yet she was glad she'd gone—she'd rather be free too late than not at all."

" Bill, do you think that if we stay here, Odiam 'ull do for us wot it did for Caro ? "

" I döan't think so. Fäather was much harder on Caro than he is on us."

"He's not hard on us—but he's unaccountable interfering; it maddens me sometimes."

"Seems as if he didn't trust us—seems sometimes as if he was afraid we'd go off like the others."

"Reckon he is—he saw how we envied Richard."

"Davy, it 'ud be cruel of us to go and leave him."

"I döan't say as I want to do that."

"Besides, it äun't likely as we'd do as well fur ourselves as Richard. We've no Miss Bardon to trouble about us—reckon we'd come to grief like Albert."

"Maybe we would."

§ 9.

Four years later Reuben bought the farmstead of Totease. Brazier died, and the Manor, anxious as usual for ready money, put up his farm for sale. It was a good place of about sixty acres, with some beautiful hop gardens and plenty of water. Reuben felt that it would be unwise to neglect such an opportunity for enlarging the boundaries of Odiam. He outbid one or two small farmers, put the place under repair, engaged more hands, and set to work to develop a large business in hops.

His enthusiasm was immense; he saw quicker returns from hops than from anything else, and the sheltered position of Totease made it possible to cover the whole of it with goldings and fuggles. He built a couple of new oasts with concrete roofs, and announced his intention of engaging London pickers that autumn. There was great perturbation at the Rectory—the Manor had long since abandoned social crusades—because Reuben housed these pickers indiscriminately in a barn. It was also said that he underpaid them. The rector was quite insensible to his argument that if a man were fool enough to work for two shillings a day, why should wise men lose money by preventing

him? Also he compelled no one to come, so the indiscriminate sleepers were only, so to speak, volunteers—and when the rector persisted he became coarse on the subject.

His temper had grown a little difficult of late years—it had never been a particularly pleasant one, but it had been fierce rather than quick. His sons felt uneasily that they were partly responsible for this—they irritated him by asserting their independence. Also he suspected them of a lack of enthusiasm. He had tried to arrange a marriage for David with the daughter of the new farmer at Kitchenhour. She was ten years older than he, and not strikingly beautiful, but she satisfied Reuben's requirements by being as strong as a horse and having a hundred a year of her own. His indignation was immense when David refused this prize.

"I can't abear the sight of her."

"You'll git used to her, lad."

"Well, I want something better than that."

"She's got a hundred a year, and that 'ud mäake our fortunes at Odiam."

"Odiam's doing splendid—you don't want no more."

"I justabout do. I shan't be satisfied till I've bought up Grandturzel säum as I've bought Totease."

"Well, I'm not going to sacrifice myself for Odiam, and you've no right to ask me, dad."

"If I haven't got a right to ask you that, wot have I, I'd lik to know?"

§ 10.

In the spring of '99 old Jury died over at Cheat Land. His wife had died a year or two earlier—Reuben had meant to go over and see Alice, but the untimely calving of a new Alderney had put the idea entirely out of his head. On this occasion, however, he attended the funeral, with the other farmers of the district, and at

the churchyard gate had a few words with Alice before she went home.

She was a middle-aged woman now, but her eyes were as bright as ever, which made her look strangely young. Her hair had turned very prettily grey, she was fatter in the face, and on the whole looked well and happy, in spite of her father's death. She told him she was going to live at Rye—she had a tiny income, derived from Jury's life insurance, and she meant to do art needlework for an ecclesiastical firm. Reuben experienced a vague sense of annoyance—not that he wanted her to be unhappy, but he felt that she had no right to happiness, going out into the world, poor and alone, her parents dead, her life's love missed. . . .

That summer the country was shaken by rumours of war, Reuben; having more leisure on his hands, spent it in the study of his daily paper. He could now read simple sentences, and considered himself quite an educated man. When war at last broke out in South Africa he was delighted. It was the best of all possible wars, organised by the best of all possible Governments, under the best of all possible ministers. Chamberlain became his hero—not that he understood or sympathised with his Imperialism, but he admired him for his attitude towards the small nations. He hated all talk about preserving the weak—such was not nature's way, the way of farms; there the weakest always went to the wall, and he could not see why different methods should obtain in the world at large. If Reuben had been a politician he would have kept alive no sick man of Europe, protected no down-trodden Balkan States. One of the chief reasons why he wanted to see the Boers wiped out was because they had muddled their colonisation, failed to establish themselves, or to make of the arid veldt what he had made of Boarzell.

"They're no good, them Boers," he announced at the Cocks; "there they've bin fur years and years, and

they say as how that Transvaal's lik a desert. They've got mizzling liddle farms such as I wudn't give sixpence for—and all that gurt veldt's lik the palm of my hand, naun growing. They döan't deserve to have a country."

He expressed himself so eloquently in this fashion that the member for the Rye division of Sussex—the borough had been disenfranchised in '85—asked him to speak at a recruiting meeting at the Court Hall. Unluckily Reuben's views on recruiting were peculiar.

"Now's your chance," he announced to the assembled yokels; "corn prices is going up, and every man who wants to do well by himself had better grub his pastures and sow grain. Suppose we wur ever to fight the French —who are looking justabout as ugly at us now as they did in Boney's time—think wot it 'ud be if we had grain-stocks in the country, and cud settle our own prices. My advice to the men of Rye is the same as wot I gave in this very hall thirty-five years ago—sow grain, and grain, and more grain."

The member, the colonel of the volunteers, and others present, pointed out to Reuben afterwards that the situation was military, not agricultural; but it was characteristic of him to see all situations from the agricultural point of view. His old ideas of an agricultural combine, which had fallen miserably to pieces in '65, now revived in all their strength. He saw East Sussex as a country of organised corn-growing, Odiam at the head. His rather eclectic newspaper reading had impressed him with the idea that England was on the verge of war with one or two European Powers, notably the French, whose ribald gloatings over British disasters stirred up all the fury of the man who had been born within range of the Napoleonic wars and bred on tales of Boney and his atrocities.

He was dismayed by the lack of local enthusiasm. He dug up one or two of his own pastures and planted wheat; he even sacrificed ten acres of his precious hops,

but nobody seemed inclined to follow his example. The neighbourhood was ornately patriotic, flags flew from the oast-houses at Socknersh, Union Jacks washed to delicate pastel shades by the chastening rain—while the Standard misleadingly proclaimed that the Royal Family was in residence at Burntbarns. On Odiam the boys sang :

" Goodbye, Dolly, I must leave you,
Though it breaks my heart to go—
Something tells me I am wanted
At the Front to drive away the foe."

Some of them in fact did go. Others remained, and sang :

" Good-bye, my Bluebell, farewell to you,
One last long look into your eyes of blue—
'Mid camp-fires gleaming, 'mid shot and shell,
I will be dreaming of my own Bluebell."

§ 11.

Quite early in the war David and William walked home in silence after seeing a troop-train off from Rye, then suddenly, when they came to Odiam, shook hands.

" It's our chance," said Bill.

" We've waited for it long enough."

" I couldn't have stood much more, and this will be a good excuse."

" The old man 'ull take on no end—wot with his corn-growing plans and that."

" Funny how he never seems to think of anything but Odiam."

" Strikes me as he's mad—got what you call a fixed idea, same as mad people have."

" He's sensible enough—but he's unaccountable hard to live with."

" Yes—he's fair made me hate Odiam. I liked the place well enough when I was a little lad, but he's made

me sick of it. It's all very well living on a farm and working on it, but when you're supposed to give up your whole life to it and think of nothing else, well, it's too much."

"We won't tell him that, though, Davy—we'll make out as it's pure patriotic feeling on our part."

"Yes; I don't want him to think we're set on getting away—but, by gum, Bill! we are."

"If this war hadn't happened we'd have had to have thought of something else."

So they went and broke their news to Reuben. They were careful and considerate—but he was knocked out by the blow.

"Going!—both of you!" he cried.

"We feel we've got to. They want all the young men."

"But you could help your country just as well by staying at höame and growing corn."

"You can grow corn without us—we're wanted out there."

"But you're all I've got—one go, and t'other stay."

"No, we must stick together."

"Oh, I know, I know—you've always thought more of each other than of your father or of Odiam."

"Don't say that, dad—we care for you very much, and we're coming back."

"There's no one gone from here as has ever come back."

For the first time they noticed something of the cracked falsetto of old age in his voice, generally so firm and ringing. Their hearts smote them, but the instinct of self-preservation was stronger than pity. They knew now for certain that if they stayed Odiam would devour them, or at best they would escape maimed and only half alive. Either they must go at once—in time, like Richard, or go in a few years—too late, like Caro. Besides, the war called to their young blood; they

thought of guns and bayonets, camp-fires and battle-fields, glory and victory. Their youth called them, and even their father's game and militant old age could not silence its bugles and fifes.

The next day they left Odiam for the recruiting station at Rye. Reuben and the farm-hands watched them as they marched off whistling "Good-bye, Dolly, I must leave you," shaking their shoulders in all the delight of their new freedom. They had gone—as Albert had gone, as Robert, as Richard, as Tilly, as Benjamin, as Caro, as Pete had gone. Reuben stood erect and stiff, his eyes following them as they turned out of the drive and disappeared down the Peasmarsh road.

When they were out of sight he walked slowly to the new ground near the crest of Boarzell, which was being prepared for the winter wheat. He made a sign to the man who was guiding the plough, and taking the handles himself, shouted to the team. The plough went forward, the red earth turned, sprinkled, creamed into long furrows, and soothed Reuben's aching fatherhood with its moist fertile smell. It was the faithful earth, which was his enemy and yet his comforter—which was always there, though his children forsook him—the good earth to which he would go at last.

§ 12.

Reuben was now alone at Odiam—for the first time. Of course Harry was with him still, but Harry did not count. There was an extraordinary vitality in him, none the less; it was as if the energies unused by his brain were diverted to keep together his crumbled body. He grew more shrivelled, more ape-like every day, and yet he persisted in life. He still scraped at his fiddle, and would often sit for hours at a time mumbling—"Only a poor old man—a poor old man—old man—old man," over and over again, sometimes with a

sudden shrill cry of " Salvation's got me ! " or " Another wedding !—we're always having weddings in this house." His brother avoided him, and did his best to ignore him —he was the scar of an old wound.

His loneliness seemed to drive Reuben closer to the earth. He still had that divine sense of the earth being at once his enemy and his only friend. Just as the gorse which murders the soil with its woody fibres sweetens all the air with its fragrance, so Reuben when he fought the harsh strangling powers of the ground also drank up its sweetness like honey. He did not work so hard as formerly, though he could still dig his furrow with the best of them—he knew that the days had come when he must spare himself. But he maintained his intercourse with the earth by means of long walks in the surrounding country.

Hitherto he had not gone much afield. If affairs had called him to Battle, Robertsbridge, or Cranbrook, he had driven or ridden there as a matter of business—he had seldom walked in the more distant bye-lanes, or followed the field-paths beyond the marshes. Now he tramped over nearly the whole country within a radius of ten miles—he was a tireless walker, and when he came home knew only the healthy fatigue which is more delight than pain and had rewarded his dripping exertions as a young man.

He would walk southwards to Eggs Hole and Dinglesden, then across the Tillingham marshes to Coldblow and Pound House, then over the Brede River to Snailham, and turning up by Guestling Thorn, look down on Hastings from the mill by Batchelor's Bump. Or he would go northwards to strange ways in Kent, down to the Rother Marshes by Methersham and Moon's Green, then over to Lambstand, and by side-tracks and bostals to Benenden—back by Scullsgate and Nineveh, and the lonely Furnace road.

He learned to love the moving shadows of clouds

travelling over a sunlit view—to love ridged distances fading from dark bice, through blue, to misty grey. He used to watch for the sparkle of light on far cottage windows, the white sheen of farmhouse walls and the capped turrets of oasts. But he loved best of all to feel the earth under his cheek when he cast himself down, the smell of her teeming sap, the sensation that he lay on a kind breast, generous and faithful. It was strange that the result of all his battles should be this sense of perfect union, this comfort in his loneliness. Reuben was not ashamed at eighty years old to lie full length in some sun-hazed field, and stretch his body over the grass, the better to feel that fertile quietness and moist freshness which is the comfort of those who make the ground their bed.

He never let anyone see him in these moments—somehow they were almost sacred to him, the religion of his godless old age. But soon the more distant cottagers came to know him by sight, and watch for the tall old man who so often tramped past their doors. He always walked quickly, his head erect, a stout ash stick in his hand. He was always alone—not even a dog accompanied him. He wore dark corduroys, and either a wide-brimmed felt hat, or no hat at all, proud of the luxuriance of his iron-grey hair. They soon came to know who he was.

"'Tis old Mus' Backfield from Odiam farm by Peasmarsh. They say as he's a hard man."

"They say as he's got the purtiest farm in Sussex—he's done wäonders fur Odiam, surelye."

"But his wife and children's run away."

"They say he's a hard man."

"And he's allus alöan."

"He döan't seem to care for nobody—never gives you the good marnun."

"It's larmentäable to see an old feller lik that all alöan, wudout friend nor kin."

" He's straight enough in spite of it all—game as a youngster he is."

§ 13.

Meanwhile the South African War dragged its muddled length from Stormberg to Magersfontein, through Colenso to Spion Kop. It meant more to Reuben than any earlier war—more than the Crimea, for then there were no newspaper correspondents, more than the Indian Mutiny, for that was with blacks, or the Franco-Prussian, for that was between furriners. Besides, there were two additional factors of tremendous importance —he could now spell out a good deal of his daily paper, and his sons were both fighting. They had gone out early in November, and were very good about writing to him.

They could afford to be generous now they were free, so they sent him long letters, carefully printed out, as he could not read running hand. They told him wonderful stories of camps and bivouacs, of skirmishes and snipings. They enlarged on the grilling fierceness of the December sun which had burnt their faces brick-red and peeled their noses—on the flies which swarmed thicker by far than over Odiam midden—on the awful dysentery that grabbed at half their pals—on the hypocritical Boers, who read the Bible and used dum-dum bullets.

They came safely through Magersfontein, the only big encounter in which they were both engaged. David was made a sergeant soon afterwards. Reuben sent them out tobacco and chocolate, and contributed to funds for supplying the troops with woollen comforts. He felt himself something of a patriot, and would talk eagerly about " My son the Sergeant," or " My boys out at the Front."

He was very busy over his new corn scheme, and as time went on came to resent the attitude of the European

Powers in not attacking England and forcing her to subsist on her own grain supplies. All Europe hated Britain, so his newspapers said, so why did not all Europe attack Britain with its armies as well as with its Press? We would beat it, of course—what was all Europe but a set of furriners?—meantime our foreign wheat supplies would be cut off by the prowling navies of France, Germany, Russia and everywhere else, which Reuben imagined crowding the seas, while the true-born sons of Britain, sustaining themselves for the first time on British-grown corn, and getting drunk for the first time on beer innocent of foreign hop-substitutes, would drive upstart Europe to its grave, and start a millennium of high prices and heavy grain duties.

However, Europe was disobliging; corn prices hardly rose at all, and Reuben was driven to the unwelcome thought that the only hope of the British farmer was milk—at least, that was not likely ever to be imported from abroad.

The year wore on. Kimberley and Ladysmith were relieved. Rye hung out its flags, and sang "Dolly Grey" louder than ever. Then Mafeking was saved, and a bonfire was lit up at Leasan House, in which a couple of barns and some stables were accidentally involved. Everyone wore penny medallion portraits of officers—Roberts and Baden-Powell were the favourites at Odiam, which nearly came to blows with Burntbarns over the rival merits of French. While Reuben himself bought a photograph of Kitchener in a red, white, and blue frame.

Then suddenly an honour fell on Odiam. The War Office itself sent it a telegram. But the honour was taken sadly, for the telegram announced that Sergeant David Backfield had been killed in action at Laing's Nek.

§ 14.

It was not the first time death had visited Reuben, but it was the first time death had touched him. His father's death, his mother's, George's, Albert's, had all somehow seemed much more distant than this very distant death in Africa. Even Naomi's had not impressed him so much with sorrow for her loss as sorrow for the inadequacy of her life.

But David's death struck home. David and William were the only two children whom he had really loved. They were his hope, his future. Once again he tasted the agonies of bereaved fatherhood, with the added tincture of hopelessness. He would never again see David's brown, strong, merry face, hear his voice, build plans for him. For some days the paternal feeling was so strong that he craved for his boy quite apart from Odiam, just for himself. It had taken eighty years and his son's death to make a father of him.

An added grief was the absence of a funeral. Reuben did not feel this as the relief it would have been to some. He had given handsome and expensive funerals to those not half so dear as this young man who had been hurried into his soldier's grave on the lonely veldt. In course of time William sent him a snapshot of the place, with its little wooden cross. Reuben dictated a tremendously long letter through Maude the dairy-woman, in which he said he wanted a marble headstone put up, and "of Odiam, Sussex," added to the inscription.

The neighbourhood pitied him in his loss. There was indeed something rather pathetic about this old man of eighty, who had lost nearly all his kith and kin, yet now tasted bereavement for the first time. They noticed that he lost some of the erectness which had distinguished him, the corners of his mouth drooped, and his

hair, though persistently thick, passed from iron grey to a dusty white.

One day when he was walking through the village he heard a woman say as he passed—" There he goes ! I pity un, poor old man ! " The insult went into him like a knife. He turned round and gave the woman his fiercest scowl. Old indeed ! Had one ever heard of such a thing ! old !—and he could guide the plough and dig furrows in the marl, and stack, and reap with any of 'em. Old !—why, he was only—

—He was eighty. He suddenly realised that, after all, he *was* old. He did not carry himself as erectly as he had used ; there were pains and stiffness in his limbs and rheumatic swellings in his joints. His hair was white, and his once lusty arms were now all shrivelled skin and sinew, with the ossified veins standing out hard and grey. He was what Harry was always calling himself—" only a poor old man "—a poor old man who had lost his son, whom cottage women pitied from their doorsteps—and be hemmed to them, the sluts !

§ 15.

Meantime affairs at Grandturzel were going from bad to worse. Reuben did not speak much about Grandturzel, but he watched it all the same, and as time wore on a look of quiet satisfaction would overspread his face when it was mentioned at the Cocks. He watched the tiles drip gradually off its barn roofs, he watched the thatch of its haggards peel and moult, he watched the oasts lose their black coats of tar, while the wind battered off their caps, and the skeleton poles stuck up forlornly from their turrets. Holes wore in the neat house-front, windows were broken and not mended, torn curtains waved signals of distress. It was only a question of waiting.

Reuben often went to the Cocks, for he had heard it

said that one's beer-drinking capacities diminished with old age, and he was afraid that if he stayed away, men would think it was on that account. So he went frequently, particularly if the weather was of a kind to keep old people at home. He did not talk much, preferring to listen to what was said, sitting quietly at his table in the corner, with the quart of Barclay and Perkins's mild which had been his evening drink from a boy.

It was at the Cocks that he learned most of Grandturzel's straits, though he occasionally made visits of inspection. Realf had messed his hops that autumn, and the popular verdict was that he could not possibly hold out much longer.

" Wot'll become of him, I wäonder ? " asked Hilder, the new man at Socknersh.

" Someone 'ull buy him up, I reckon," and young Coalbran, who had succeeded his father at Doozes, winked at the rest of the bar, and the bar to a man turned round and stared at old Reuben, who drew himself up, but said nothing.

" Wot d'you think of Grandturzel, Mus' Backfield ? " someone asked waggishly.

" Naun," said Reuben ; " I'm waiting."

He did not have to wait long. A few days later he was told that somebody wanted to see him, and in the parlour found his daughter Tilly.

He had seen Tilly at intervals through the years, but as he had never allowed himself to give her more than a withering glance, he had not a very definite idea of her. She was now nearly fifty-five, and more than inclined to stoutness—indeed, her comfortable figure was almost ludicrous compared with her haggard, anxious face, scored with lines and patched with shadows. Her grey hair was thin, and straggled on her forehead, her eyes had lost their brightness ; yet there was nothing wild or terrible about her face, it was just domesticity in desperation.

"Fäather," she said as Reuben came into the room.

"Well?"

"Henry döan't know I've come," she murmured helplessly.

"Wot have you come fur?"

"To ask you—to ask you—Oh, fäather!" she burst into tears, her broad bosom heaved under her faded gown, and she pressed her hands against it as if to keep it still.

"Döan't täake on lik that," said Reuben, "tell me wot you've come fur."

"I dursn't now—it's no use—you're a hard man."

"Then döan't come sobbing and howling in my parlour. You can go if you've naun more to say."

She pulled herself together with an effort.

"I thought you might—perhaps you might help us . . ."

Reuben said nothing.

"We're in a larmentable way up at Grandturzel."

Her father still said nothing.

"I döan't know how we shall pull through another year."

"Nor do I."

"Oh, fäather, döan't be so hard!"

"You said I wur a hard man."

"But you'll—you'll help us jest this once. I know you're angry wud me, and maybe I've treated you badly. But after all, I'm your daughter, and my children are your grandchildren."

"How many have you got?"

"Five—the youngest's rising ten."

There was a pause. Reuben walked over to the window and looked out. Tilly stared at his back imploringly. If only he would help her with some word or sign of understanding! But he would not—he had not changed; she had forsaken him and married his rival, and he would never forget or forgive.

She had been a fool to come, and she moved a step or two towards the door. Then suddenly she remembered the anguish which had driven her to Odiam. She had been frantic with grief for her husband and children; only the thought of their need had made it possible for her to override her inbred fear and dislike of Reuben and beg him to help them. She had come, and since she had come it must not be in vain; the worst was over now that she was actually here, that she had actually pleaded. She would face it out.

"Fäather!" she called sharply.

He turned round.

"I thought maybe you'd lend us some money—just fur a time—till we're straight agäun."

"You'd better ask somebody else."

"There's no one round here as can lend us wot we need—it's—it's a good deal as we'll want to see us through."

"Can't you mortgage?"

"We are mortgaged—the last foot"—and she burst into tears again.

Reuben watched her for a minute or two in silence.

"You've bin a bad daughter," he said at last, "and you've got no right to call on me. But I've had my plans for Grandturzel this long while."

She shuddered.

"This mortgage business alters 'em a bit. I'll have to think it over. Maybe I'll let you hear to-morrow mornun."

"Oh, fäather, if only you'll do anything fur us, we'll bless you all our lives."

"I döan't want you to bless me—and maybe you wöan't täake my terms."

"I reckon we haven't much choice," she said sorrowfully.

"Well, you've only got wot you desarve," said Reuben, turning to the door.

Tilly opened her mouth to say something, but was wise, and held her tongue.

§ 16.

The next morning Reuben sent his ultimatum to Grandturzel. He would pay off Realf's mortgage and put the farm into thorough repair, on condition that Grandturzel was made over to him, root, stock, crop, and inclosure, as his own property—the Realfs to live in the dwelling-house rent free and work the place for a monthly wage.

These rather strange terms had been the result of much thought on his part. His original plan had been simply to buy the farm for as little money as Realf would take, but Tilly's visit had inspired him with the happy thought of getting it for nothing. As the land was mortgaged it would be very difficult for Realf to find buyers, who would also be discouraged by the farm's ruinous state of disrepair. Indeed, Reuben thought himself rather generous to offer what he did. He might have stipulated for Realf to pay him back in a given time part of the money disbursed on his account. After all, mortgage and repairs would amount to over a thousand pounds, so when he talked of getting the place for nothing it was merely because the mortgage and the repairs would have to be tackled anyhow. He had little fear of Realf's refusing his terms—not only was he very unlikely to find another purchaser, but no one else would let him stay on, still less pay him for doing so. Reuben had thought of keeping him on as tenant, but had come to the conclusion that such a position would make him too independent. He preferred rather to have him as a kind of bailiff—the monthly, instead of the weekly, wage making acceptance just possible for his pride.

Of course Reuben himself would rather have wandered

roofless for the rest of his life than live as a hireling on the farm which had once been his own. But he hardly thought Realf would take such a stand—he would consider his wife and children, and accept for their sakes. " If he's got the sperrit to refuse I'll think better of him than I've ever thought in my life, and offer him a thousand fur the pläace—but I reckon I'm purty safe."

He was right. Realf accepted his offer, partly persuaded by Tilly. His mortgage foreclosed in a couple of months, and he had no hopes of renewing it. If he rejected Reuben's terms, he would probably soon find himself worse off than ever—his farm gone with nothing to show for it, and himself a penniless exile. On the other hand, his position as bailiff, though ignominious, would at least leave him Grandturzel as his home and a certain share in its management. He might be able to save some money, and perhaps at last buy a small place of his own, and start afresh. . . . He primed himself with such ideas to help drug his pride. After all, he could not sacrifice his wife and children to make a holiday for his self-respect. Tilly was past her prime, and not able for much hard work, and though his eldest boys had enlisted, like Reuben's, and were thus no longer on his mind, he had two marriageable girls at home besides his youngest boy of ten. One's wife and children were more to one than one's farm or one's position as a farmer—and if they were not, they ought to be.

So a polite if rather cold letter was written accepting Odiam's conditions, and Tilly thanked heaven that she had sacrificed herself and gone to plead with her father.

§ 17.

The whole of Boarzell now belonged to Odiam, except the Fair-place at the top. Reuben would stare covetously at the fir and gorse clump which still defied him ;

but he had reached that point in a successful man's development when he comes to believe in his own success; bit by bit he had wrested Boarzell from the forces that held it, and he could not think that one patch would withstand him to the end.

As luck would have it, the only piece that was not his was the Moor's most characteristic feature, the knob of firs that made it a landmark for miles round. While they still stood men could still talk of and point at Boarzell, but when he had cut them down, grubbed up the gorse at their roots, ploughed over their place—then Boarzell would be lost, swallowed up in Odiam; it would be at most only a name, perhaps not even that. Sometimes Reuben shook his fist at the fir clump and muttered, "I'll have you yet, you see if I döan't, surelye."

Meantime he devoted his attention to the land he had just acquired. The Grandturzel inclosure was put under cultivation like the rest of Boarzell, and a stiff, tough, stony ground it proved, reviving all Reuben's love of a fight. He was glad to have once more, as he put it, a piece of land he could get his teeth into. Realf could not help a half resentful admiration when he saw his father-in-law's ploughs tearing through the flints, tumbling into long chocolate furrows what he had always looked upon as an irreclaimable wilderness.

He accepted his position with a fairly good grace—to complain would have made things worse for Tilly and the children. He was inclined privately to scoff at some of Reuben's ideas on farming, but even as he did so he realised the irony of it. He might have done otherwise, yes, but he was kicked out of his farm, the servant of the man whose methods he thought ridiculous.

Reuben on his side thought Realf a fool. He despised him for failing to lift Grandturzel out of adversity, as he had lifted Odiam. He would not have kept him on

as bailiff if he had thought there would have otherwise been any chance of his accepting Odiam's terms. He disliked seeing him about the place, and did not find—as the neighbourhood pictured he must—any satisfaction in watching his once triumphant rival humbly performing the duties of a servant on the farm that used to be his own. Reuben's hatreds were not personal, they were merely a question of roods and acres, and when that side of them was appeased, nothing remained. They were, like almost everything else of his, a question of agriculture, and having now settled Realf agriculturally he had no grudge against him personally.

About this time old Beatup died. He was Odiam's first hand, and had seen the farm rise from sixty acres and a patch on Boarzell to two hundred acres and nearly the whole Moor. Reuben was sorry to lose him, for he was an old-fashioned servant—which meant that he gave much in the way of work and asked little in the way of wages or rest. The young men impudently demanded twenty shillings a week, wanted afternoons in the town, and complained if he worked them overtime—there had never been such a thing as overtime till board schools were started.

However, of late Beatup had been of very little use. He was some years younger than Reuben, but he looked quite ten years older, and his figure was almost exactly like an S. The earth had used him hardly, steaming his bones into strange shapes and swellings, parching his skin to something dark and crackled like burnt paper, filling him with stiffness and pains. Reuben had straightened his shoulders, which had drooped a little after David's death, and once more carried his old age proudly, as the crown of a hale and strenuous life.

He looked forward to William coming back and settling down at Odiam. It would be good to have companionship again. The end of the war was in sight —only a guerilla campaign was being waged among

the kopjes, Kruger had fled from Pretoria, and everyone talked of Peace.

At last Peace became an accomplished fact. Reuben could not help a few disloyal regrets that his corn-growing had been in vain, but he consoled himself with the thought that now he would have William back in a few weeks. He expected a letter from him, and grew irritable when none came. Billy had not been so good about writing since David's death, but his father thought that he at least might have written to announce his return. As things were, he did not know when to expect him. He supposed he was bound to get his discharge, and he would have heard if anything had happened to him. Why did not William hurry home to share Odiam's greatness with his old father?

At last the letter came. Reuben took it into the oast-barn to read it. His hands trembled as he tore the envelope, and there was a dimness in his eyes, so that he could scarcely make out the big printing hand. But it was not the dimness of his eyes which was responsible for the impossible thing he saw; at first he thought it must be, and rubbed them—yet the unthinkable was still there. William was not coming back at all.

"This place suits me, and I think I could do well for myself out here. I feel I should get on better if I was my own master. . . . She was good and sensible-like, and looked as if she could manage things. So I married her. . . . We're starting up on a little farm near Jo'burg . . . I can't see it matters her being Dutch . . . fifty acres of pasture . . . ten head of cattle . . . niggers to work . . ."

. . . The words danced and swam before Reuben, with black heaving spaces between that grew wider and wider, till at last they swallowed him up.

For the first time in his life he had fainted.

§ 18.

Reuben's last hope was now gone—for his family, at least. He was forced regretfully to the conclusion that he was not a successful family man. Whatever methods he tried with his children, severity or indulgence, he seemed bound to fail. He had had great expectations of David and William, brought up, metaphorically, on cakes and ale, and they had turned out as badly as Albert, Richard—Reuben still looked upon Richard as a failure—Tilly, or Caro, who had been brought up, literally, on cuffs and kicks.

And the moral of it all was—not to trust anyone but yourself to carry on with you or after you the work of your life. Your ambition is another's afterthought, your afterthought his ambition. He would not give a halfpenny for that for which you would give your life. If you have many little loves, you have always a comrade ; if you have one great love, you are always alone. This is the Law.

His pride would not let him give way to his grief. He was not going to have any more of " Pity the poor old man." He mentioned William's decision almost casually at the Cocks. However, he need not have been afraid. " No more'n he desarves," was the universal comment . . . " shameful the way he treated Grandturzel " . . . " no feeling fur his own kin " . . . " the young feller was wise not to come back." Indeed, locally the matter was looked upon as a case of poetic justice, and the rector's sermon on Sunday, treating of the wonderful sagacity of Providence, was taken, rightly or wrongly, to have a personal application.

Meantime, in Reuben's heart was darkness. As was usual when any fear or despair laid hold of him, he became obsessed by a terror of his old age. Generally he felt so well and vigorous that he scarcely realised he

was eighty-two; but now he felt an old man, alone and childless. Harry's reiterated "only a poor old man . . . a poor old man," rang like a knell in his ears. It was likely that he would not live much longer—he would probably die with the crest of Boarzell yet unconquered. He made a new will, leaving his property to William on condition that he came home to take charge of it, and did not sell a single acre. If he refused these conditions, he left it to Robert under similar ones, and failing him to Richard. It was a sorry set of heirs, but there was no help for it, and he signed his last will and testament with a grimace.

Fair day was to be a special holiday that year because of the Coronation. Reuben at first thought that he would not go—it was always maddening to see the booths and shows crowding over his Canaan, and circumstances would make his feelings on this occasion ten times more bitter. But he had never missed the Fair except for some special reason, such as a funeral or an auction, and he felt that if he stayed away it might be put down to low spirits at his son's desertion, or, worse still, to his old age.

So he came, dressed in his best, as usual, with corduroy breeches, leggings, wide soft hat, and the flowered waistcoat and tail-coat he had refused to discard. He was no longer the centre of a group of farmers discussing crops and weather and the latest improvements in machinery —he stood and walked alone, inspecting the booths and side-shows with a contemptuous eye, while the crowd stared at him furtively and whispered when he passed . . . "There he goes" . . . "old Ben Backfield up at Odiam." Reuben wondered if this was fame.

The Fair had moved still further with the times. The merry-go-round organ played "Bluebell," "Dolly Grey," and "The Absent-Minded Beggar," the chief target in the shooting-gallery was Kruger, with Cronje and De Wet as subordinates, and the Panorama showed

Queen Victoria's funeral. The fighting booth was hidden away still further, and dancing now only started at nightfall. There were some new shows, too. The old-fashioned thimble-rigging had given place to a modern swindle with tickets and a dial; instead of the bearded woman or the pig-faced boy, one put a penny in the slot and saw a lady undress—to a certain point. There was a nigger in a fur-lined coat lecturing on a patent medicine, while the stalls themselves were of a more utilitarian nature, selling whips and trousers and balls of string, instead of the ribbon and gingerbread fairings bought by lovers in days of old.

Reuben prowled up and down the streets of booths, grinned scornfully at the efforts in the shooting gallery, watched a very poor fight in the boxing tent, had a drink of beer and a meat pie, and came to the conclusion that the Fair had gone terribly to pieces since his young days.

He found his most congenial occupation in examining the soil on the outskirts, and trying to gauge its possibilities. The top of Boarzell was almost entirely lime—the region of the marl scarcely came beyond the outskirts of the Fair. Of course the whole place was tangled and matted with the roots of the gorse, and below them the spreading toughness of the firs. Reuben fairly ached to have his spade in it. He was kneeling down, crumbling some of the surface mould between his fingers, when he suddenly noticed a clamour in the Fair behind him. The vague continuous roar was punctuated by shrill screams, shouts, and an occasional crash. He rose to his feet, and at the same moment a bunch of women rushed out between the two nearest stalls, shrieking at the pitch of their lungs.

They ran down towards the thickset hedge which divided the Fair-place from Odiam's land, and to his horror began to try to force their way through it, screaming piercingly the while. Reuben shouted to them:

" Stop—you're spoiling my hëadge ! "

" He's after us—he'll catch us—O-o-oh ! "

" Who's after you ? "

But before they had time to answer, something burst from between the stalls and ran down the darkling slope, brandishing a knife. It was Mexico Bill, running amok, as he had sometimes run before, but on less crowded occasions. The women sent up an ear-splitting yell, and made a fresh onslaught on the hedge. Someone grabbed the half-breed from behind, but his knife flashed, and the next moment he was free, dashing through the gorse towards his victims.

Reuben was paralysed with horror. In another minute they would break down his hedge—a good young hedge that had cost him a pretty penny—and be all over his roots. For a moment he stood as if fixed to the spot, then suddenly he pulled himself together. At all costs he must save his roots. He could not tackle the women single-handed, so he must go for the madman.

" Backfield's after him ! "

The cry rose from the mass up at the stalls, as the big dark figure with flapping hat-brim suddenly sprang out of the dusk and ran to meet Mexico Bill. Reuben was an old man, and his arm had lost its cunning, but he carried a stout ash stick and the maniac saw no one but the women at the hedge. The next moment Reuben's stick had come against his forehead with a terrific crack, and he had tumbled head over heels into a gorse-bush.

In another minute half the young men of the Fair were sitting on him, and everyone else was crowding round Backfield, thanking him, praising him, and shaking him by the hand. The women could hardly speak for gratitude—he became a hero in their eyes, a knight at arms. . . . " To think as how when all them young fellers up at the Fair wur no use, he

shud risk his life to save us—he's a präaper valiant man."

But Reuben hardly enjoyed his position as a hero. He succeeded in breaking free from the crowd, now beginning to busy itself once more with Mexico Bill, who was showing signs of returning consciousness, and plunged into the mists that spread their frost-smelling curds over the lower slopes of Boarzell.

" Thank heaven I saved them rootses ! " he muttered as he walked.

Then suddenly his manner quickened ; a kind of exaltation came into his look, and he proudly jerked up his head :

" I'm not so old, then, after all."

BOOK VIII

THE VICTORY

§ 1.

THE next year, Richard and Anne Backfield took a house at Playden for week-ends. Anne wanted to be near her relations at the Manor, and Richard, softened by prosperity, had no objection to returning to the scene of his detested youth.

A week or two before they arrived Reuben went to Playden, and looked over the house. It was a new one, on the hill above Star Lock, and it was just what he would have expected of Richard and Anne—gimcrack. He scraped the mortar with his finger-nail, poked at the tiles with his stick, and pronounced the place jerry-built in the worst way. It had no land attached to it, either—only a silly garden with a tennis court and flowers. Richard's success struck him as extremely petty compared with his own.

He did not see much of his son and daughter-in-law on their visits. Richard was inclined to be friendly, but Anne hated Odiam and all belonging to it, while Reuben himself disliked calling at Starcliffe House, because he was always meeting the Manor people.

The family at Flightshot consisted now of the Squire, who had nothing against him except his obstinacy, his lady, and his son who was just of age and "the most tedious young rascal" Reuben had ever had to deal with. He drove a motor-car with hideous din up and down the Peasmarsh lanes, and once Odiam had had

the pleasure of lending three horses to pull it home from the Forstal. But his worst crimes were in the hunting field; he had no respect for roots or winter grain or hedges or young spinneys. Twice Reuben had written to his father, through Maude the scribe, and he vowed openly that if ever he caught him at it he'd take a stick to him.

The result of all this was that George Fleet, being young and humorous, indulged in some glorious rags at old Backfield's expense. He had not been to Cambridge for nothing, and one morning Reuben found both his house doors boarded up so that he had to get out by the window, and on another occasion his pigs were discovered in a squalling mass with their tails tied together. There was no good demanding retribution, for the youth's scandalised innocence when confronted with his crimes utterly convinced his fools of parents, and gave them an opinion of his accuser that promised ill for his ultimate possession of the Fair-place.

Reuben still dreamed of that Fair-place, and occasionally schemed as well; but everything short of the death of the Squire—and his son—seemed useless. However, he now had the rest of Boarzell in such a state of cultivation that he sometimes found it possible to forget the land that was still unconquered. That year he bought a hay-elevator and a steam-reaper. The latter was the first in the neighbourhood—never very go-ahead in agricultural matters—and quite a crowd collected when it started work in the Glotten Hide, to watch it mow down the grain, gather it into bundles, and crown the miracle by tying these just as neatly as, and much more quickly than, a man.

Though Reuben's corn had not done much for him materially, it had far-reaching consequences of another kind. It immensely increased his status in the county. Odiam had more land under grain cultivation than any farm east of Lewes, and the local Tories saw in Back-

field a likely advocate of Tariff Reform. He was approached by the Rye Conservative Club, and invited to speak at one or two of their meetings. He turned out to be, as they had expected, an ardent champion of the new idea. "It wur wot he had worked and hoped and prayed fur all his life—to git back them Corn Laws." He was requested not to put the subject quite so bluntly.

So in his latter days Reuben came back into the field of politics which he had abandoned in middle age. Once more his voice was heard in school-houses and mission-halls, pointing out their duty and profit to the men of Rye. He was offered, and accepted, a Vice-Presidentship of the Conservative Club. Politics had changed in many ways since he had last been mixed up in them. The old, old subjects that had come up at election after election—vote by ballot, the education of the poor, the extension of the franchise, Gladstone's free breakfast table—had all been settled, or deformed out of knowledge. The only old friend was the question of a tax on wheat, revived after years of quiescence—to rekindle in Reuben's old age dreams of an England where the corn should grow as the grass, a golden harvest from east to west, bringing wealth and independence to her sons.

§ 2.

The only part of the farm that was not doing well was Grandturzel. The new ground had been licked into shape under Reuben's personal supervision, but the land round the steading, which had been under cultivation for three hundred years, yielded only feeble crops and shoddy harvests—things went wrong, animals died, accidents happened.

Realf had never been a practical man—perhaps it was to that he owed his downfall. Good luck and ambition had made him soar for a while, but he lacked the dogged qualities which had enabled Reuben to play

for years a losing game. Besides, he had to a certain extent lost interest in land which was no longer his own. He worked for a wage, for his daily bread, and the labour of his hands and head which had once been an adventure and a glory, was now nothing but the lost labour of those who rise up early and late take rest.

Also he was in bad health—his hardships and humiliations had wrought upon his body as well as his soul. He was not even the ghost of the man whose splendid swaggering youth had long ago in Peasmarsh church first made the middle-aged Reuben count his years. He stooped, suffered horribly from rheumatism, had lost most of his hair, and complained of his eyesight.

Reuben began to fidget about Grandturzel. He told his son-in-law that if things did not improve he would have to go. In vain Realf pleaded bad weather and bad luck—neither of them was ever admitted as an excuse at Odiam.

The hay-harvest of 1904 was a good one—of course Realf's hay had too much sorrel in it, there was always something wrong with Realf's crops—but generally speaking the yield was plentiful and of good quality. Reuben rejoiced to feel the soft June sun on his back, and went out into the fields with his men, himself driving for some hours the horse-rake over the swathes, and drinking at noon his pint of beer in the shade of the waggon. In the evening the big hay-elevator hummed at Odiam, and old Backfield stood and watched it piling the greeny-brown ricks till darkness fell, and he went in to supper and the sleep of his old age.

It took about a week to finish the work—on the last day the fields which for so long had shown the wind's path in tawny ripples, were shaven close and green, scattering a sweet steam into the air—a soft pungency that stole up to the house at night and lapped it round with fragrance. Old Reuben stretched himself contentedly as he went into his dim room and prepared to

lie down. The darkness had hardly settled on the fields —a high white light was in the sky, among the stars.

He went to bed early with the birds and beasts. Before he climbed into the bed, lying broad and white and dim in the background of the candleless room, he opened the window, to drink in the scent of his land as it fell asleep. The breeze whiffled in the orchard, fluttering the boughs where the young green apples hid under the leaves, there was a dull sound of stamping in the barns . . . he could see the long line of his new hay-cocks beyond the yard, soft dark shapes in the twilight.

He was just going to turn back into the room, his limbs aching pleasantly for the sheets, when he noticed a faint glow in the sky to southward. At first he thought it was a shred of sunset still burning, then realised it was too far south for June—also it seemed to flicker in the wind. Then suddenly it spread itself into a fan, and cast up a shower of sparks.

The next minute Reuben had pulled on his trousers and was out in the passage, shouting " Fire ! "

The farm men came tumbling from the attics— " Whur, mäaster ? "

" Over at Grandturzel—can't see wot's burning from here. Git buckets and come ! "

Shouts and gunshots brought those men who slept out in the cottages, and a half-dressed gang, old Reuben at the head, pounded through the misty hay-sweet night to where the flames were spreading in the sky. From the shoulder of Boarzell they could see what was burning—Realf's new-made stacks, two already aflame, the others doomed by the sparks which scattered on the wind.

No one spoke, but from Realf's yard came sounds of shouting, the uneasy lowing and stamping of cattle, and the neigh of terrified horses. The whole place was lit up by the glare of the fire, and soon Reuben could see Realf and his two men, Dunk and Juglery, with Mrs.

Realf, the girls, and young Sidney, passing buckets down from the pond and pouring them on the blazing stacks—with no effect at all.

" The fools ! Wot do they think they're a-doing of ? Döan't they know how to put out a fire ? "

He quickened his pace till his men were afraid he would " bust himself," and dashing between the burning ricks, nearly received full in the chest the bucket his son-in-law had just swung.

" Stop ! " he shouted—" are your cattle out ? "

" No."

" Then git 'em out, you fool ! You'll have the whole pläace a bonfire in a minnut. Wot's the use of throwing mugs of water lik this ? You'll never put them ricks out. Säave your horses, säave your cows, säave your poultry. Anyone gone for the firemen ? "

" Yes, I sent a boy over fust thing."

" Why didn't you send to me ? "

" Cudn't spare a hand."

" Cudn't spare one hand to fetch over fifteen—that's a valiant idea. Now döan't go loitering ; fetch out your cattle afore they're roast beef, git out the horses and all the stock—and souse them ricks wot äun't burning yit."

The men scurried in all directions obeying his orders. Soon terrified horses were being led blindfold into the home meadow ; the cows and bullocks, less imaginative, followed more quietly. Meantime buckets were passed up from the pond to the stacks that were not alight ; but before this work was begun Reuben went up to the furthest stack and thrust his hand into it—then he put in his head and sniffed. Then he called Realf.

" Cöame here."

Realf came.

" Wot's that ? "

Realf felt the hay and sniffed like Reuben.

" Wot's that ? " his father-in-law repeated.

Realf went white to the lips, and said nothing.

"I'll tell you wot it is, then!" cried Reuben—"it's bad stacking. This hay äun't bin präaperly dried—it's bin stacked damp, and them ricks have gone alight o' themselves, bust up from inside. It's your doing, this here is, and I'll mäake you answer fur it, surelye."

"I—I—the hay seemed right enough."

"Maybe it seems right enough to you now?"—and Reuben pointed to the blazing stacks.

Realf opened his lips, but the words died on them. His eyes looked wild and haggard in the jigging light; he groaned and turned away. At the same moment a pillar of fire shot up from the roof of the Dutch barn.

The flying sparks had soon done their work. Fires sprang up at a distance from the ricks, sometimes in two places at once. Everyone worked desperately, but the water supply was slow, and though occasionally these sporadic fires were put out, generally they burned fiercely. Wisps of blazing hay began to fly about the yard, lodging in roofs and crannies. By the time the fire engine arrived from Rye, the whole place was alight except the dwelling-house and the oasts.

The engine set to work, and soon everything that had not been destroyed by fire was destroyed by water. But the flames were beaten. They hissed and blackened into smoke. When dawn broke over the eastern shoulder of Boarzell, the fire was out. A rasping pungent smell rose from a wreckage of black walls and little smoking piles of what looked like black rags. Water poured off the gutters of the house, and soused still further the pile of furniture and bedding that had been pulled hastily out of it. The farm men gathered round the buckets, to drink, and to wash their smoke-grimed skins. Reuben talked over the disaster with the head of the fire brigade, who endorsed his opinion of spontaneous combustion; and Realf of Grandturzel sat on a heap of ashes—and sobbed.

§ 3.

That morning Reuben had a sleep after breakfast, and did not come down till dinner-time. He was told that Mrs. Realf wanted to see him and had been waiting in the parlour since ten. He smiled grimly, then settled his mouth into a straight line.

He found his daughter in a chair by the window. Her face was puffed and blotched with tears, and her legs would hardly support her when she stood up. She had brought her youngest son with her, a fine sturdy little fellow of fourteen. When Reuben came into the room she gave the boy a glance, and, as at a preconcerted signal, they both fell on their knees.

"Git up!" cried Backfield, colouring with annoyance.

"We've come," sobbed Tilly, "we've come to beg you to be merciful."

"I wöan't listen to you while you're lik that."

The son sprang to his feet, and helped his mother, whose stoutness and stiffness made it a difficult matter, to rise too.

"If you've come to ask me to kip you and your husband on at Grandturzel," said Reuben, "you might have säaved yourself the trouble, fur I'm shut of you both after last night."

"Fäather, it wur an accident."

"A purty accident—wud them stacks no more dry than a ditch. 'Twas a clear case of 'bustion—fireman said so to me; as wicked and tedious a bit o' wark as ever I met in my life."

"It'll never happen agäun."

"No—it wöan't."

"Oh, fäather—döan't be so hard on us. The Lord knows wot'll become of us if you turn us out now. It 'ud have been better if we'd gone five years ago—Realf

wur a more valiant man then nor wot he is now. He'll never be able to start agäun—he äun't fit fur it."

"Then he äun't fit to work on my land. I äun't a charity house. I can't afford to kip a man wud no backbone and no wits. I've bin too kind as it is—I shud have got shut of him afore he burnt my pläace to cinders."

"But wot's to become of us?"

"That's no consarn of mine—äun't you säaved anything?"

"How cud we, fäather?"

"I could have säaved two pound a month on Realf's wage."

Tilly had a spurt of anger.

"Yes—you'd have gone short of everything and made other folks go short—but we äun't that kind."

"You äun't. That's why I'm turning you away."

Her tears welled up afresh.

"Oh, fäather, I'm sorry I spöake lik that. Döan't be angry wud me fur saying wot I did. I'll own as we might have managed better—only döan't send us away—fur this liddle chap's sake," and she pulled forward young Sidney, who was crying too.

"Where are your other sons?"

"Harry's got a wife and children to keep—he cudn't help us; and Johnnie's never mäade more'n fifteen shilling a week since the war."

Reuben stood silent for a moment, staring at the boy.

"Does Realf know you've come here?" he asked at length.

"Yes," said Tilly in a low voice.

There was another silence. Then suddenly Reuben went to the door and opened it.

"There's no use you waiting and vrothering me—my mind's mäade up."

"Fäather, fur pity's säake——"

" Döan't talk nonsense. How can I sit here and see my land messed about by a fool, jest because he happens to have married my darter?—and agäunst my wish, too. I'm sorry fur you, Tilly, but you're still young enough to work. I'm eighty-five, and I äun't stopped working yet, so döan't go saying you're too old. Your gals can go out to service . . . and this liddle chap here . . ."

He stopped speaking, and stared at the lad, chin in hand.

" He can work too, I suppose? " said Tilly bitterly.

" I wur going to say as how I've täaken a liking to him. He looks a valiant liddle feller, and if you'll hand him over to me and have no more part nor lot in him, I'll see as he doesn't want."

Tilly gasped.

" I've left this farm to William," continued Reuben, " because I've naun else to leave it to that I can see. All my children have forsook me ; but maybe this boy 'ud be better than they."

" You mean that if we let you adopt Sidney, you'll mäake Odiam his when you're gone? "

" I döan't say for sartain—if he turns out a präaper lad and is a comfort to me and loves this pläace as none of my own children have ever loved it——"

But Tilly interrupted him. Putting her arm round the terrified boy's shoulders, she led him through the door.

" Thanks, fäather, but if you offered to give us to-day every penny you've got, I'd let you have no child of mine. Maybe we'll be poor and miserable and have to work hard, but he wöan't be one-half so wretched wud us as he'd be wud you. D'you think I disremember my own childhood and the way you mäade us suffer? You're an old man, but you're hearty—you might live to a hundred—and I'd justabout die of sorrow if I

thought any child of mine wur living wud you and being mäade as miserable as you mäade us. *I'd rather see my boy dead than at Odiam.*"

§ 4.

There was a big outcry in Peasmarsh against Backfield's treatment of the Realfs. Not a farmer in the district would have kept on a hand who had burnt nearly the whole farm to ashes through bad stacking, but this fact did little to modify the general criticism. A dozen excuses were found for Realf's "accident," as it came to be called—"and old Ben cud have afforded to lose a stack or two, surelye."

Reuben was indifferent to the popular voice. The Realfs cleared out bag and baggage the following month. No one knew their destination, but it was believed they were to separate. Afterwards it transpired that Realf had been given work on a farm near Lurgashall, while Tilly became housekeeper to a clergyman, taking with her the boy she would rather have seen dead than at Odiam. Nothing was heard of the daughters, and local rumour had it that they went on the streets; but this pleasing idea was shattered a year or two later by young Alce, the publican's son, coming back from a visit to Chichester and saying he had found both the girls in service in a Canon's house, doing well, and one engaged to marry the butler.

Reuben did not trouble about the Realfs. Tilly had been no daughter of his from the day she married; it was a pity he had ever revoked his wrath and allowed himself to be on speaking terms with her and her family; if he had turned them out of Grandturzel straight away there would have been none of this absurd fuss—also he would not have lost a good crop of hay. But he comforted himself with the thought that his magnanimity had put about a thousand pounds into his pocket, so he could afford to ignore the cold shoulder which

was turned to him wherever he went. And the hay was insured.

He gave up going to the Cocks. It had fallen off terribly those last five years, he told Maude the dairy-woman, his only confidant nowadays. The beer had deteriorated, and there was a girl behind the counter all painted and curled like a Jezebubble, and rolling her eyes at you like this. . . . If any woman thought a man of his experience was to be caught, she was unaccountable mistaken (this doubtless for Maude's benefit, that she might build no false hopes on the invitation to bring her sewing into the kitchen of an evening). Then the fellows in the bar never talked about stocks and crops and such like, but about race-horses and football and tomfooleries of that sort, wot had all come in through the poor being educated and put above themselves. Moreover, there was a gramophone playing trash like "I wouldn't leave my little wooden hut for you"—and the tale of Reuben's grievances ended in expectoration.

All the same he was lonely. Maude was a good woman, but she wasn't his equal. He wanted to speak to someone of his own class, who used to be his friend in days gone by. Then suddenly he thought of Alice Jury. He had promised to go and see her at Rye, but had never done so. He remembered how long ago she had used to comfort him when he felt low-spirited and neglected by his fellows. Perhaps she would do the same for him now. He did not know her address, but the new people at Cheat Land would doubtless be able to give it to him, and perhaps Alice would help him through these trying times as she had helped him through earlier ones.

A few days later he drove off in his trap to Rye. Though he had scarcely thought of her for ten years, he was now all aflame with the idea of meeting her. She would be pleased to see him, too. Perhaps their long-buried emotions would revive, and as old people they

would enjoy a friendship which would be sweeter than the love they had promised themselves in more ardent days.

Alice lived in lodgings by the Ypres Tower. The little crinkled cottage looked out over the marshes towards Camber and the masts of ships. Reuben was shown into a room which reminded him of Cheat Land long ago, for there were books arranged on shelves, and curtains of dull red linen quaintly embroidered. There was a big embroidery frame on the table, and over it was stretched a gorgeous altar-cloth all woven with gold and violet tissue.

He was inspecting these things when Alice came in. Her hair was quite white now, and she stooped a little, but it seemed to Reuben as if her eyes were still as lively as ever. Something strange suddenly flooded up in his heart and he held out both hands.

"Alice . . ." he said.

"Good afternoon," she replied, putting one hand in his, and withdrawing it almost immediately.

"I—I—äun't you pleased to see me?"

"I thought you'd forgotten all about me, certainly."

She offered him a chair, and he sat down. Her coldness seemed to drive back the tides that had suddenly flooded his lips, and slowly too they began to ebb from his heart. Whom had he come to see?—the only woman he had ever loved, whose love he had hoped to catch again in these his latter days, and hold transmuted into tender friendship, till he went back to his earth? Not so, it seemed—but an old woman who had once been a girl, with whom he had nothing in common, and from whom he had travelled so far that they could scarcely hear each other's voices across the country that divided them. Alice broke the silence by offering him some tea.

"Thanks, but I döan't täake tea—I've never held wud it."

" How are you, Reuben ? I've heard a lot about you, but nothing from you yourself. Is it true that you ve sent away your daughter and her family from Grandturzel ? "

" Yes—after they'd burnt the pläace down to the ground."

" And where are they now ? "

" I dunno."

Alice said nothing, and Reuben fired up a little :

" I daresay you think badly of me, lik everyone else. But if a man mäade a bonfire of your new stacks, I reckon you wouldn't say ' thank'ee,' and raise his wages."

Another pause—then Alice said :

" How are you getting on with Boarzell ? I hear that most of it's yours now."

" All except the Fair-pläace—and I mean to have that in a year or two, surelye."

This time it was she that kindled :

" You talk as if you'd all your life before you—and you must be nearly eighty-five."

" I döan't feel old—at least not often. I still feel young enough to have a whack at the Fair-pläace."

" So you haven't changed your idea of happiness ? "

" How d'you mean ? "

" Your idea of happiness always was getting something you wanted. Well, lately I've discovered my idea of happiness, and that's—wanting nothing."

" Then you *have* got wot you want," said Reuben cruelly.

" I don't think you understand."

" My old fäather used to say—' I want nothing that I haven't got, and so I've got nothing that I döan't want, surelye.' "

" It's all part of the same idea, only of course he had many more things than I have. I'm a poor woman, and

lonely, and getting old. But "—and a ring of exaltation came into her voice, and the light of it into her eyes—"I want nothing."

"I wish you'd talk plain. If you never want anything, then you äun't präaperly alive. So you äun't happy—because you're dead."

"You don't understand me. It's not because I'm dead and sluggish that I don't want anything, but because I've had fight enough in me to triumph over my desires. So now everything's mine."

"Fust you say as how you're happy because you've got nothing, and now you say as everything's yourn. How am I to know wot you mean?"

"Well, compare my case with yours. You've got everything you want, and yet in reality you've got nothing."

"That's nonsense, Alice." He spoke more gently, for he had come to the conclusion that sorrow and loneliness had affected her wits.

"It isn't. You've got what you set out to get—Boarzell Moor, and success for Odiam; but in getting it you have lost everything that makes life worth while—wife, children, friends, and—and—love. You're like the man in the Bible who rebuilt Jericho, and laid the foundations in his firstborn, and set up the gates in his youngest son."

"There you go, Alice! lik the rest of them—no more understanding than anyone else. Can't you see that *it's bin worth while?*"

"What do you mean?"

"Why, that it's worth losing all those things that I may get the one big thing I want. Döan't you see that Boarzell and Odiam are worth more to me than wife or family or than you, Alice. Come to that, you've got none o' them things either, and you haven't a farm to mäake up fur it. So even if I wur sorry fur wot I'm not sorry fur, I'm still happier than you."

"No you aren't—because you want a thing, and I want nothing."

"I've got a thing, my girl, and you've got nothing."

They had both risen and faced each other, anger in their eyes. But their antagonism had lost that vital quality which had once made it the salt of their friendship.

"You döan't understand me," said Reuben—"I'd better go."

"You don't understand me," said Alice—"you can't."

"We've lost each other," said Reuben—"good-bye."

Alice smiled rather bitterly, and had a moment of vision.

"The fact is that we can't forgive each other—for being happy in different ways."

"I tell you I'm sorry for nothing."

"Nor I."

So they parted.

Reuben drove back slowly through the October afternoon. A transparent brede of mist lay over the fields, occasionally torn by sunlight. Everything was very quiet—sounds of labour stole across the valley from distant farms, and the barking of a dog at Stonelink seemed close at hand. Now and then the old man muttered to himself: "We döan't understand each other—we döan't forgive each other—we've lost each other. We've lost each other."

He knew now that Alice was lost. The whole of Boarzell lay between them. He had thought that she would be always there, but now he saw that between him and her lay the dividing wilderness of his success. She was the offering and the reward of failure—and he had triumphed over failure as over everything else.

He drove through Peasmarsh and turned into the Totease lane. The fields on both sides of it were his now. He sniffed delightedly the savour of their sun-baked earth, of the crumpling leaves in their hedges,

of the roots, round and portly, that they nourished in their soil—and the west wind brought him the scent of the gorse on Boarzell, very faintly, for now only the thickets of the top were left.

Almost the whole south was filled by the great lumpish mass of the Moor, no longer tawny and hummocky, but lined with hedges and scored with furrows, here and there a spread of pasture, with the dotted sheep. A mellow corn-coloured light rippled over it from the west, and the sheep bleated to each other across the meadows that had once been wastes. . . .

"My land," murmured old Reuben, drinking in the breeze of it. "My land—more to me than Alice." Then with a sudden fierceness:

"I'm shut of her!"

§ 5.

The next year came the great Unionist collapse. The Government which had bumped perilously through the South African war, went on the rocks of an indignant peace—wrecked by Tariff Reform with the complication of Chinese Labour and the Education Bill. Once more Reuben took prominent part in a general election. The circumstances were altered—no one threw dead cats at him at meetings, though the common labouring men had a way of asking questions which they had not had in '65.

Old Backfield spoke at five meetings, each time on Tariff Reform and the effect it would have on local agriculture. The candidate and the Unionist Club were very proud of him, and spoke of him as "a grand old man." On Election Day, one of the candidates' own cars was sent to fetch him to the Poll. It was the first time Reuben had ever been in a motor, but he did his best to dissemble his excitement.

"It's lik them trains," he said to the chauffeur, "unaccountable strange and furrin-looking at first, but

naun to spik of when you're used to 'em. Well I remember when the first railway train wur run from Rye to Hastings—and most people too frightened to go in it, though it never mäade more'n ten mile an hour."

Though the country in general chose to go to the dogs, Reuben had the consolation of seeing a Conservative returned for Rye. He put this down largely to his own exertions, and came home in high good humour from the declaration of the Poll. Mr. Courthope, the successful candidate, had shaken him by the hand, and so had his agent and one or two prominent members of the Club. They had congratulated him on his wonderful energy, and wished him many more years of usefulness to the Conservative cause. He might live to see a wheat-tax yet.

He compared his present feelings with the miserable humiliation he had endured in '65. Queer!—that election seemed almost as real and vivid to him as this one, and—he did not know why—he found himself feeling as if it were more important. His mind recaptured the details with startling clearness—the crowd in the market-place, the fight with Coalbran, the sheep's entrails that were flung about . . . and suddenly, sitting there in his arm-chair, he found himself muttering: "that hemmed gëate!"

It must be old age. He pulled himself together, as a farm-hand came into the room. It was Boorman, one of the older lot, who had just come back from Rye.

"Good about the poll, mäaster, wurn't it?" he said—the older men were always more cordial towards Reuben than the youngsters. They had seen how he could work.

"Unaccountable good."

"I mäade sure as how Mus' Courthope ud git in. 'Täun't so long since we sent up another Unionist—seems strange when you and me remembers that a Tory never sat fur Rye till '85."

" When did you come back ? "

" I've only just come in, mäaster. Went räound to the London Trader after hearing the poll. By the way, I picked up a piece of news thur—old Jury's darter wot used to be at Cheat Land has just died. Bob Hilder töald me—seems as she lodges wud his sister."

" Um."

" Thought you'd be interested to hear. I remember as how you used to be unaccountable friendly wud them Jurys, considering the difference in your position."

" Yes, yes—wot did she die of ? "

" Bob dudn't seem to know. She allus wur a delicate-looking woman."

" Yes—a liddle stick of a woman. That'll do, now."

Boorman went out, grumbling at " th' öald feller's cussedness," and Reuben sat on without moving.

Alice was dead—she had died in his hour of triumph. Just when he had succeeded in laying his hands on one thing more of goodness and glory for Odiam, she who had nothing and wanted nothing had gone out into the great nothingness. A leaden weight seemed to have fallen on him, for all that he was " shut of her."

The clock ticked on into the silence, the fire spluttered, and a cat licked itself before it. He sat hunched miserably, hearing nothing, seeing nothing. In his breast, where his heart had used to be, was a heavy dead thing that knew neither joy nor sorrow. Reuben was feeling old again.

§ 6.

" Please, mäaster, there's trouble on the farm."

Reuben started out of the half-waking state into which he had fallen. It was late in the afternoon, the sunlight had gone, and a wintry twilight crept up the wall. Maude the dairy-woman was looking in at the door.

" Wot is it ? Wot's happened ? "

" Boorman asked me to fetch you. They've had some vrother wud the young Squire, and he's shot a cow."

" Shot one of my cows ! " and Reuben sprang to his feet. " Where, woman ? Where ? "

" Down at Totease. He wur the wuss for liquor, I reckon."

Reuben was out of the house bare-headed, and running across the yard to the Totease meadows. He soon met a little knot of farm-hands coming towards him, with three rather guilty-looking young men.

" Wot's happened ? " he called to Boorman.

" Only this, mäaster—Dunk and me found Mus' Fleet a-tearing about the Glotten meadow wud two of his friends, trying to fix Radical posters on the cows—seems as they'd räaked up one or two o' them old Ben the Gorilla posters wot used to be about Peasmarsh, and they'd stuck one on Tawny and one on Cowslip, and wur fair racing the other beasts to death. Then when me and the lads cöame up and interfere, they want to fight us—and when we täake höald of 'em, seeing as they 'pear to be a liddle the wuss for drink, why Mus' Fleet he pulls out a liddle pistol and shoots all around, and hits poor öald Dumpling twice over."

" Look here, farmer," said one of the young men—" we're awfully sorry, and we'll settle with you about that cow. We were only having a rag. We're awfully sorry."

" Ho, indeed ! I'm glad to hear it. And you'll settle wud me about the cow ! Wur it you who shot her, I'd lik to know ? "

" I didn't actually fire the pistol—but we're all in the same boat. Had a luncheon over at Rye to cheer ourselves up after seeing the Tory get in. We're awfully sorry."

" You've said that afore," said Reuben.

He pondered sternly over the three young men, who

all looked sober enough now. As a matter of fact, Dumpling was no great loss ; fifteen pounds would have paid for her. But he was not disposed to let off George Fleet so easily. Against the two other youths he bore no grudge—they were just ordinary ineffective young asses, of Radical tendencies, he noted grimly. George, however, stood on a different footing ; he was the mocker of Odiam, the perpetrator of many gross and silly practical jokes at its expense. He should not escape with the mere payment of fifteen pounds, for he owed Reuben the punishment of his earlier misdeeds.

" The man as shot my cow shall answer fur it before the magistrate," he said severely.

" Look here——" cried George Fleet, and his two friends began to bid for mercy, starting with twenty pounds.

" Be a sport," pleaded one of them, when they had come to forty, " you simply can't hand him over to the police—his father's Squire of the Manor, and it would be no end of a scandal."

" I know who his fäather is, thank'ee," said Reuben.

Then suddenly a great, a magnificent, a triumphant idea struck him. He nearly staggered under the force of it. He was like a general who sees what he had looked upon hitherto as a mere trivial skirmish develop into a battle which may win him the whole campaign. He spoke almost faintly.

" Someone go fur the Squire."

" Sir Eustace ! "

" Yes—fetch him here, and I'll talk the matter over wud him."

" But——"

" Either you fetch him here or I send fur the police."

The two young men stared at each other, then George Fleet nodded to them :

" You'd better go. The dad'll be better than a

policeman anyhow. Try and smooth him down a bit on the way."

"Right you are"—and they reluctantly moved off, leaving their comrade in the enemy's hands.

However, Reuben's whole manner had changed. His attitude towards George Fleet became positively cordial. He took him into the kitchen, and made Maude give him some tea. He himself paced nervously up and down, a queer look of exaltation sometimes passing over his face. One would never have taken him for the same man as the old fellow who an hour ago had huddled weak and almost senile in his chair, broken under his life's last tragedy. He felt young, strong, energetic, a soldier again.

The Squire soon arrived. Reuben had him shown into the parlour, and insisted on seeing him alone.

"You finish your tea," he said to George, "and bring some more, Maudie, for these gentlemen," nodding kindly to the two young men, who stared at him as if they thought he had taken leave of his senses.

In the parlour, Sir Eustace greeted him with mingled nervousness and irritation.

"Well, Backfield, I'm sorry about this young scapegrace of mine. But boys will be boys, you know, and we'll make it all right about that cow. I promise you it won't happen again."

"I'm sorry to have given you the trouble of coming here, Squire. But I thought maybe you and I cud come to an arrangement wudout calling in the police."

"Oh, certainly, certainly. You surely wouldn't think of doing that, Backfield. I promise you the full value of the cow."

"Quite so, Squire. But it äun't the cow as I'm vrothered about so much as these things always happening. This äun't the first 'rag,' as he calls it, wot he's had on my farm. I've complained to you before."

"I know you have, and I promise you nothing of this kind shall ever happen again."

"How am I to know that, Squire? You can't kip the young man in a prammylator. Now if he wur had up before the magistrate and sent to prison, it 'ud be a lesson as he'd never disremember."

"But think of me, Backfield! Think of his mother! Think of us all! It would be a ghastly thing for us. I promise to pay you the full value of the cow—and of your damaged self-respect into the bargain. Won't that content you?"

"Um," said Reuben—"it might."

The Squire thought he had detected Backfield's little game, and a relieved affability crept into his manner.

"That'll be all right," he said urbanely. "Of course I understand your feelings are more important to you than your cow. We'll do our best to meet you. What do you value them at, eh?"

"The Fair-pläace."

§ 7.

He had triumphed. He had beaten down the last resistance of the enemy, won the last stronghold of Boarzell. It was all his now, from the clayey pastures at its feet to the fir-clump of its crown. A trivial event which he had been able to seize and turn to his advantage had unexpectedly given him the victory.

The Squire had called it blackmail and made a terrible fuss about it, but from the first the issues had been in Reuben's hands. A public scandal, the appearance of Flightshot's heir before the county magistrates on the charge of shooting a cow in a drunken frolic, was simply not to be contemplated; the only son of the Manor must not be sacrificed to make a rustic holiday. After all, ever since the Inclosure the Fair had been merely a matter of toleration; and as Backfield pointed out, it could easily go elsewhere—to the big Tillingham

meadow outside Rye, for instance, where the wild beast shows pitched when they came. All things considered, resistance was not worth while, and Flightshot made its last capitulation to Odiam.

Of course there was a tremendous outcry in Peasmarsh and the neighbourhood. Everyone knew that the Fair was doomed—Backfield would never allow it to be held on his land. His ploughs and his harrows were merely waiting for the negotiations to be finished before leaping, as it were, upon this their last prey. He would even cut down the sentinel firs that for hundreds of years had kept grim and lonely watch over the Sussex fields—had seen old Peasen Mersch when it was only a group of hovels linked with the outside world by lanes like ditches, and half the country a moor like the Boar's Hyll.

The actual means by which he acquired the Fair-place never quite transpired, for the farm-men were paid for their silence by Sir Eustace, and also had a kindly feeling for young George which persisted after the money was spent. However, one or two of the prevalent rumours were worse for Reuben than the facts, and if anyone, in farmhouse or cottage, had ever had a grudging kindness for the man who had wrested a victory out of the tyrant earth, he forgot it now.

But Reuben did not care. He had won his heart's desire, and public opinion could go where everything else he was supposed to value, and didn't, had gone. In a way he was sorry, for he would have liked to discuss his triumph at the Cocks, seasoning it with pints of decadent ale. As things were, he had no one to talk it over with but the farm-men, who grumbled because it meant more work—Maude, who said she'd be sorry when all that pretty gorse was cleared away—and old mad Harry, now something very like a grasshopper, whose conversation since the blaze at Grandturzel had

been limited entirely to the statement that " the house was afire, and the children were burning."

But this isolation did not trouble Reuben much. He had lost mankind, but he had found the earth. The comfort that had sustained him after the loss of David and William, was his now in double measure. The earth, for which he had sacrificed all, was enough for him now that all else was gone. He was too old to work, except for a snip or a dig here and there, but he never failed to direct and supervise the work of the others. Every morning he made his rounds on horseback—it delighted him to think that they were too long to make on foot. He rode from outpost to outpost, through the lush meadows and the hop-gardens of Totease, across the lane to the wheatlands of Odiam, and then over Boarzell with its cornfields and wide pastures to Grandturzel, where the orchards were now bringing in a yearly profit of fifteen pounds an acre. All that vast domain, a morning's ride, was his—won by his own ambition, energy, endurance, and sacrifice.

In the afternoon he took life easy. If it was warm and fine he would sit out of doors, against the farmhouse wall, his old bones rejoicing in the sunshine, and his eager heart at the sight of Boarzell shimmering in the heat—while sounds of labour woke him pleasantly from occasional dozes.

When evening came and the cool of the day, he would go for a little stroll—round by Burntbarns or Socknersh or Moor's Cottage, just to see what sort of a mess they were making of things. He was no longer upright now, but stooped forward from the hips when he walked. His hair was astonishingly thick—indeed it seemed likely that he would die with a full head of hair—but he had lost nearly all his teeth—a very sore subject, wisely ignored by those who came in contact with him. The change that people noticed most was in his eyes. In spite of their thick brows, they were no longer fierce and

stern ;—they were full of that benign serenity which one so often sees in the eyes of old men—just as if he had not ridden roughshod over all the sweet and gentle things of life. One would think that he had never known what it was to trample down happiness and drive love out of doors—one would think that having always lived mercifully and blamelessly he had reaped the reward of a happy old age.

§ 8.

Reuben did not go to the Fair that autumn—there being no reason why he should and several why he shouldn't. He went instead to see Richard, who was down for a week's rest after a tiring case. Reuben thought a dignified aloofness the best attitude to maintain towards his son—there was no n ed for them to be on bad terms, but he did not want anyone to imagine that he approved of Richard or thought his success worth while. Richard, for his part, felt kindly disposed towards his father, and a little sorry for him in his isolation. He invited him to dinner once or twice, and, realising his picturesqueness, was not ashamed to show him to his friends.

There were several of his friends at Starcliffe that afternoon—men and women rising in the worlds of literature, law, and politics. It was possible that Richard would contend the Rye division—in the Liberal interest, be it said with shame—and he was anxious to surround himself with those who might be useful to him. Besides, he was one of those men who breathe more freely in an atmosphere of Culture. Apart from mere utilitarian questions, he liked to talk over the latest books, the latest *cause célèbre* or diplomatic *coup d'état*. Anne, very upright, very desiccated, poured out tea, and Reuben noted with satisfaction that Nature had beaten her at the battle of the dressing-

table. Richard, on the other hand, in spite of an accentuation of the legal profile, looked young for his age and rather buckish, and rumour credited him with an intrigue with a lady novelist.

He received his father very kindly, giving him a seat close to the table so that he might have a refuge for his cup and saucer, and introducing him to a gentleman who, he said, was writing a book on Sussex commons and anxious for information about Boarzell.

"But I owe you a grudge, Mr. Backfield, for you have entirely spoilt one of the finest commons in Sussex. The records of Boarzell go back to the twelfth century, and in the Visitations of Sussex it is referred to as a fine piece of moorland three hundred acres in extent and grown over with heather and gorse. I went to see it yesterday, and found only a tuft of gorse and firs at the top."

"And they're coming out this week," said Reuben triumphantly.

"Can't I induce you to spare them? There are only too few of those ancient landmarks left in Sussex."

"And there'd be fewer still, if I had the settling of 'em. I'd lik to see the whole of England grown over wud wheat from one end to the other."

"It would be a shame to spoil all the wild places, though," said a vague-looking girl in an embroidered frock, with her hair in a lump at her neck.

"One wants a place where one can get back to Nature," said a young man with a pince-nez and open-work socks.

"But my father's great idea," said Richard, "is that Nature is just a thing for man to tread down and subdue."

"It can't be done," said the young man in the open-work socks—"it can't be done. And why should we want to do it?—is not Nature the Mother and Nurse of

us all ?—and is it not best for us simply to lie on her bosom and trust her for our welfare ? "

" If I'd a-done that," said Reuben, " I shouldn't have an acre to my näum, surelye."

" And what do you want with an acre ? What is an acre but a man's toy—a child's silly name for a picture it can't understand. Have you ever heard Pan's pipes ? "

" I have not, young man."

" Then you know nothing of Nature—the real goddess, many-breasted Ceres. What can you know of the earth, who have never danced to the earth's music ? "

" I once stayed on the Downs," said the girl in the embroidered frock, speaking dreamily, " and one twilight I seemed to hear elfin music on the hill. I tore off my shoes and let down my hair and I danced—I danced . . ."

" Ah," said the youth in the open-work socks approvingly. " That's very like an episode in ' Meryon's House,' you know—that glorious scene in which Jennifer the Prostitute goes down to the New Forest with Meryon and suddenly begins dancing in a glade."

" Of course, being a prostitute, she'd be closer to Nature than a respectable person."

" I thought ' Meryon's House ' the worst bilge this year has given us," said a man in a braided coat.

" Or that Meryon has given us, which is saying more," put in someone else.

" I hate these romantic realists—they're worse than the old-fashioned Zola sort."

The conversation had quite deserted Reuben, who sat silent and forgotten in his corner, thinking what fools all these people were. After he had wondered what they were talking about for a quarter of an hour, he rose to go, and gave a sigh of relief when the fresh air of Iden Hill came rustling to him on the doorstep.

"He's a fine old fellow, your father, Backfield," said the man who was writing a book on Sussex commons. "I can almost forgive him for spoiling one of the best pieces of wild land in the county."

"A magnificent old face," said a middle-aged woman with red hair—"the lining of it reminds me of those interesting Italian peasants one meets—they wrinkle more beautifully than a young girl keeps her bloom. I should like to paint him."

"So should I," said the girl in the embroidered frock —"and I've been taking note of his clothes for our Earlscourt Morris Dancers."

Richard felt almost proud of his parent.

"He's certainly picturesque—and really there's a good deal of truth in what he says about having got the better of Nature. Thirty years ago I'd have sworn he could never have done it. But it's my firm conviction that he has—and made a good job of it too. He's fought like the devil, he's been hard on every man and himself into the bargain, he's worked like a slave, and never given in. The result is that he's done what I'd have thought no man could possibly do. It's really rather splendid of him."

"Ah—but he's never heard Pan's pipes," said the youth in the open-work socks.

§ 9.

Reuben drove slowly homewards through the brooding October dusk. The music of the Fair crept after him up the Foreign, and from the crest he could see the booths and stalls looking very small in the low fields by the Rother. "I wouldn't leave my little wooden hut for you," played the merry-go-round, and there was some mysterious quality in that distant tune which made Reuben whip the old horse over the hill, so as to be out of reach of it.

So much of his life had been bound up with the Fair

that somehow a part of him seemed to be jigging at it still, down in the Rother field. It was at the Fair that he had first resolved to conquer Boarzell, and he saw himself rushing with the crowd to Totease, scuffling round the barns while the big flames shot out . . . and later he saw himself dancing with Naomi to Harry's fiddle. What had Harry played?—a strange tune, "The Song of Seth's House"—one never heard it now, but he could remember fragments of it. . . .

These troubling thoughts were forgotten when he came to his own frontiers. He drove up to the farm-house door, and handing over the trap to a boy, went out for his evening inspection of Boarzell.

The sunset guttered like spent candles in the wind—the rest of the sky was grey, like the fields under it. The distant bleating of sheep came through the dropping twale, as Reuben climbed the Moor. His men were still at work on the new ground, and he made a solemn sour of inspection. They were cutting down the firs and had entirely cleared away the gorse, piling it into a huge bonfire. All that remained of Boarzell's golden crown was a pillar of smoke, punctured by spurts and sparks of flame, rising up against the clouds. The wind carried the smell away to Socknersh and Burntbarns, and the farm-men there looked up from their work to watch the glare of Boarzell's funeral pyre.

Reuben moved away from the crest and stood looking round him at what had once been Boarzell Moor. A clear watery light had succeeded the sunset, and he was able to see the full extent of his possessions. From the utmost limits of Grandturzel in the south, to the Glotten brook in the north, from Socknersh in the east to Cheat Land in the west—all that he could see was his. Out of a small obscure farm of barely sixty acres he had raised up this splendid dominion, and he had tamed the roughest, toughest, fiercest, cruellest piece of ground in Sussex, the beast of Boarzell.

His victory was complete. He had done all that he had set out to do. He had done what everyone had told him he could never do. He had made the wilderness to blossom as the rose, he had set his foot upon Leviathan's neck, and made him his servant for ever.

He stood with his arms folded over his chest, and watched the first stars flicker above Castweasel. The scent of the ground steamed up to mingle with the mists, a soft rasp of frost was in the air, and the earth which he had loved seemed to breathe out towards him, and tell him that by his faithful service he had won not only Boarzell but all gracious soil, all the secrets of seed-time and harvest, all the tender mysteries of sap and growth.

He knew that not only the land within these boundaries was his—his possessions stretched beyond it, and reached up to the stars. The wind, the rain, dawns, dusks, and darkness were all given him as the crown of his faithfulness. He had bruised Nature's head—and she had bruised his heel, and given him the earth as his reward.

"I've won," he said softly to himself, while behind him the blazing gorse spat and crackled and sent flames up almost to the clouds with triumphant roars—"I've won—and it's bin worth while. I've wanted a thing, and I've got it, surelye—and I äun't too old to enjoy it, nuther. I may live to be a hunderd, a man of my might. But if I go next week, I shan't complain, fur I've lived to see my heart's desire. I've fought and I've suffered, and I've gone hard and gone rough and gone empty—but I haven't gone in vain. It's all bin worth it. Odiam's great and Boarzell's mine—and when I die . . . well, I've lived so close to the earth all my days that I reckon I shan't be afraid to lie in it at last."

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